

With death came change

Potsdam entrepreneur finds grief startup

From Alix Faßmann



The death of a loved one is a deep cut for the bereaved. The exchange with other mourners can help.

Ulf Leonhard is a great guy, runs marathons, is a doer, a networker, one who wants to convince and seeks success. For himself and others. The main thing is to move forward, always further, higher and faster if possible.

Then suddenly everything comes to a standstill. In February 2019, his wife Gabriele is diagnosed with pancreatic cancer at the age of 55.

A death sentence, the doctors say it, everyone knows it. Ulf Leonhard is in a shock bubble, his loud life is suddenly dull and quiet, choked with tears.

His Gabriele, "Gabi," his beloved wife fought for more than two years before she died in June 2021 at 57.

"The topic of grief is absolutely underrepresented. I would argue that you can't do it alone," the 65-year-old tells us. After the death

of his wife, Leonhard spent three weeks in a private clinic. He felt left alone by the mortician and the church. "It was there that I got the idea for a community."

Website as a club for new perspectives on life

For half his life, he said, he's been a networker, bringing people together at capital-raising events like "Staying Top." He now wants to find people who feel as he does. And then bring them together.

The network idea is still a part of Leonhard. Otherwise, nothing is the same as before. The experience of accompanying his wife as she died and seeing what two years and almost 80 chemotherapies had done to her body was profound.

"My wife was a modern pentathlete, strong and beautiful. The disease destroyed her." In the living room hangs a large picture of his "Gabi" with a friendly, reserved smile.

The portal "Withoutu.de - Club for New Perspectives" already offers nine categories according to which he himself shapes his life.

"I don't make a pit of murder out of my grief," Leonhard says. Personally and openly, he has compiled his experiences on the website.

The focus of the platform, he said, is partner loss. "The whole life model collapses when the partner dies. Especially if even much too early like my wife," Leonhard tells us. One of Leonhard's old-time mottoes: Help yourself or no one will help you.

Ordinary mourning groups are not Leonhard's thing. Men wouldn't come there anyway. And everyone else only ever talks about death and dying.

Practical help and contacts for new projects

"Coping doesn't work anyway, I always say. You have to learn to live with grief." That's also the big learning effect of his portal, he says. The main goal, he says, is to meet people who have questions, but above all ideas. Leonhard is looking for people who are looking forward.

"I don't want another virtual grievance box."

So it's all about practical life issues, such as burial, real estate, wills and inheritance, or how do I deal with jewelry, collections or business succession? But also about one's own health, how to find a good mourning companion and new perspectives?

Because Leonhard also hopes to find practical help for new projects with the portal. It is not his euphoric Kaufmann voice that he uses to describe his wishes and rather a big gap.

He sits alone at his dining table in the "magnificent old Potsdam apartment with four-meter-high ceilings. Life practice or not, "basically, sometimes it's also about everything you've discussed with your partner beforehand."

For people who have lost partners early

The target group is primarily people who lost someone at an early age. My wife is buried at the Potsdam-Bornstedt cemetery. There, an 88-year-old man is always sitting at the neighboring grave, crying at his wife's grave, Leonhard says. "I then talk to him, we comfort each other. But what can you say to an 88-year-old? Reinvent yourself?"

Leonhard takes a sober view, saying he has maybe a good 20 years left now and asks himself, "What do I want to spend that time with and who do I want to spend it with?"

The "with what" is still clear for Leonhard. He knows what he can do: Organizing events and bringing people together. The "with whom," however, has changed completely since his wife died. "With grief comes a change in values. I'm no longer impressed by fancy houses, diamonds or fancy cars," he explains.

Before his wife's diagnosis, money was undoubtedly of great Meaning. "I don't need that anymore. Loving and sincere people around me are important. Certainly also a good wine with cheese and a fine cigar once in a while." Leonhard can't stand the superficiality at many of his previous events, which were

more endure. When he hears the phrase "We really need to..." he already loses interest. "What nonsense."

"I don't need that anymore. What's important to me is to have loving and upright people around me. Certainly also a good wine and a fine cigar once in a while." Leonhard could no longer well stand the superficiality at many of his former events, he said. If he only hears the phrase "We absolutely have to ..." once in a while, he already doesn't feel like it anymore. "What nonsense!"

But the platform is not a non-profit project, so even a grieving Ulf Leonhard remains an entrepreneurial personality. He has developed a business model. 300 euros must pay each member with the registration once. "A bit of exclusivity certainly resonates, but I also don't want to exclude anyone." In the end, withoutu.de is also a start-up.

If it was feasible, he could also imagine regular meetings and events. Just please don't talk about illness and death and mourning. Celebrities could show new perspectives. One hears a bit of the old doer raving.

He can't do a marathon again yet, but he's training for the halfway mark right now.