

Grieving the Death of Your Spouse

Grief Information



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DEATH OF YOUR SPOUSE

Introduction

The death of your spouse will mean many changes in your life. Many issues will need to be dealt with and adjustments will need to be made. The loss of a shared life can be felt in terms of practical and financial issues, parenting and family roles. It can affect your intimate life, social connections, and your hopes and dreams for the future.

Cultural

In our culture, it has become difficult to grieve. There are few traditions, guidelines or family support systems available. Many of us have no mourning rituals or clear expectations of how grief should be. Often, other people don't acknowledge death and grief. We are not given permission to take the time necessary to express our grief and to adjust to our loss.

Immediate family and friends can misunderstand a bereaved spouse and be impatient with their reactions. There is an expectation for grievers to 'get on with life'. People may hide their grief so they don't lose what support they do have.

There is little recognized status to being a widow or widower in our culture. For a woman, the death of her spouse may mean a dramatic change in her place in the external world, as her spouse may have been her link to social and community status. For a man, the greatest change may be in the emotional support and friendship connections that were provided by his wife.

Social

Often, social status, community roles, and friendship connections are defined as part of a couple. When your spouse dies, your link with your social circle and the community at large may be changed. Even your roles and connections within the family will be altered, especially if your spouse was the one who maintained these relationships.

Whatever the cause of your spouse's death, it may be a challenge to maintain social connections. If your spouse died suddenly, friends and neighbours will often respond well initially, but may find it difficult to continue providing the support you need. If you have cared for someone through a lengthy illness, you may have had to let go of other relationships and activities. Not only is the main focus or purpose in your life gone, but also you may not have the energy to rekindle old friendships or to establish new ones.

With the loss of your spouse as your social companion, you will begin to relate to the world differently. The status of being a bereaved person may be respected for only a very short time. You may be treated as a single person long before

you think of yourself this way. Because there are so many more widows than widowers, women may find that they are discouraged from participation, while men may find that they are being pushed into the single role. Becoming a single person again can be a major challenge.

Marriage

Today, there are different styles of marriage and relationships. You may have had a relationship in which roles were traditionally defined or one in which roles were defined by individual preference and a need to share responsibilities. As you moved through the stages of marriage and family life, your focus would have changed with the shifting demands, expectations, and hopes. You may have been establishing your relationship, or raising children. You may have been adjusting to retirement or coping with the changes of aging.

When your spouse dies, you are left with all of the responsibilities that were previously shared. Depending on the overlap or separation of roles, the challenge you face as a surviving spouse may vary from upsetting to distressing. If you have never done a particular task before, it may be extremely difficult to master a new area. Doing something that your spouse normally did can bring up painful feelings, even if you know how to do it.

There may be several reasons why you experience a loss of intimacy. Not only have you lost a lover and sexual partner but, also, someone with whom you shared hopes and dreams, a mutual history, and day to day living. Your relationship with your spouse may have been your most important emotional support.

Marriage is often the place where roles are most clearly defined in your life and where life is predictable. As your identity has been tied up with your spouse, you may have lost a clear sense of yourself. Your self-esteem may be diminished.

As you move through the process of grief and adjustment, it is important to take care of yourself. Allow yourself to do things in your own way and to make mistakes as you learn to cope. If you can, avoid making major changes for a while. Where you do have to make choices and decisions, get reliable advice.

Remember, it may be difficult for families to support one another through grief, as everyone has their own reactions and needs. You may find that joining social or support groups provide the support necessary for you at this time. Being with other people who have lost a spouse can help you work through your grief.

COPING WITH CHALLENGES AND ISSUES

The loss of a shared life may impact or affect you in many ways. The following list offers some of the issues that bereaved spouses may have to deal with. These may help you to know that what you are going through is normal. Remember that everyone has a unique response to loss, so that some of these issues will be recognizable to you and some of them will not.

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| Practical | Having to do it all; house, yard, finances, shopping, laundry, family.
<i>What resources do you have?</i> |
| Financial | Income or status may be very different; decisions to make alone.
<i>Where can you get good advice?</i> |
| Parenting | Whether actively raising children or relating to grown family and grandchildren; full responsibility, doing it alone, no one else who cares as much, decisions, relief.
<i>Where can you get support?</i> |
| Intimacy/Sex | Loss of physical intimacy; low self-esteem; loss of lover, friend and admirer.
<i>Who appreciates and cares for you now?</i> |
| Interests | Time shared doing things together; goals, plans, holidays, hobbies.
<i>Who will share things with you now?</i> |
| History | Someone who remembers you when..., intimate knowledge of your life, ups and downs, successes
<i>How can you keep the memories alive?</i> |
| Hopes & Dreams | Future is gone; can see nothing ahead, meaninglessness, loneliness
<i>How can you find meaning now?</i> |
| Social | Maintaining old friendships, creating a social life, adjusting to the single role
<i>Who are your friends now?</i> |
| Family | Maintaining relationships; sharing grief, memories, ups and downs; communicating needs and wishes; dealing with sense of responsibility
<i>How can the family regroup after this loss?</i> |

Decision-making

Decision-making can be difficult when you are grieving. This is especially true when your partner has died and you do not have the usual person there to discuss plans, share decisions and consider consequences. Your memory, concentration and perspective may be affected by grief, leaving you with little confidence at this time.

Postpone major decisions, if you can, until you are feeling better able to handle them. If you must make major decisions, consult with an objective professional.

The following guidelines may help you tackle decision-making.

- identify the problem and your goal precisely
- list a variety of solutions, as many as you can think of
- list the advantages and disadvantages of each solution
- outline the steps necessary for each solution
- consult an expert or trusted advisor who can be objective
- review all the information gathered, looking for oversights
- make your choice
- follow through step by step

Financial affairs

Settling the estate can be a complex and exhausting task. Learning unfamiliar skills for dealing with financial affairs can be overwhelming when you are actively grieving. You may need or want help with paying bills, investing money, and planning your financial future.

Hopefully, you will not have any dealings with disreputable individuals or anyone who will take advantage of your vulnerability. Be cautious and take your time about all financial decisions, following the suggestions below.

- legal advice and assistance may be helpful with the estate or other issues
- ask your bank for help
- seek the services of a qualified accountant or financial planner to assist you
- always use a well-respected individual or firm
- before making any major decisions or investments, even with known individuals, check your plans with your bank, your lawyer, or the Better Business Bureau

Personal effects

Dealing with the personal belongings of the person who died can be very emotional. You may want to delay it because you do not have the energy, you are not up to the decisions, or you are comforted by the familiar presence. There is no particular time when this must be done, so do it when you feel ready. Doing it a bit at a time may make it manageable. Here are some helpful hints.

- ask for help from a friend or family member
- sort things into categories: things to keep, things for family and friends, things for sale or charity, things to decide about later
- repeat as necessary

Memories of recent events

Particularly in the early days of grief, you may find that you are frequently thinking about the circumstances of the illness and death. Recurring thoughts, about how the person looked or acted, about the care given, about what you and others did or didn't do, about how you heard the news, are all common and natural. Repetition seems to help us come to terms with difficult or stressful times. Although these memories are pervasive now, memories of other times will return. The following strategies may help with coping.

- go over memories as often as you need to
- talk to someone about your thoughts
- get the information you need to understand what happened

Certain rooms and places

There may be certain rooms or places that you wish to avoid as they are associated with the death or the person who died. The courage required to face these places may return of its own accord. However, if your discomfort is intense and is interfering with your day-to-day life, you may wish to seek counselling help. The following strategies may help with coping.

- at home, sleep or eat elsewhere for a while, or rearrange the furniture
- away from home, if you need to go somewhere that is uncomfortable, get someone to accompany you or meet you

Changes in relationships

You may find that other people have changed the way they relate to you since the death. Their attitudes, responses and expectations may be different. They may not be as understanding and supportive of your grief as you would like. Your own needs and responses may have changed also. Your energy for and interest in social activities may be limited. Loneliness and longing may effect your comfort and composure in social situations. Some suggestions for finding the support that you want are offered here.

- spend time with people who are comfortable and welcoming
- let people know what helps you (small groups, familiar people, quiet activities, etc.)
- consider support groups for bereaved people

Special dates and events

The calendar is full of reminders of the person who died. Birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, etc. will be times of missing and thinking of the person, especially during the first year. Planning ahead about how you want to acknowledge these times can be helpful. Give yourself permission to do things differently and review the suggestions given here.

- do what feels best for you at the time
- be alone, or be with others
- go to the gravesite or another place where you feel close to the person who died
- find ways to honour your memories, work on a memorial album or journal

Dreams and visitations

Many people have vivid dreams about the person who died, or hear, see or feel their presence. Often this is comforting, but occasionally it is not. You may be shy to share these experiences with others, but it is important to believe that your experience is real.

Although grief experts say that the majority of bereaved people have these experiences, some people long for a sense of presence and do not have it. Some helpful strategies are listed below.

- if you are distressed about a dream or visitation, talk to a counsellor or spiritual advisor
- keep a journal or diary of your thoughts, dreams and experiences
- talk to a trusted friend

Looking Ahead

In the early days of grief, it is painful to think about your future without the person who has died. As you begin to make necessary plans, you may feel guilty about going on with life. Later, as you heal, it becomes possible to plan and look forward to a future for yourself. There will be a gradual process of healing for you, re-channelling energy from grieving into living. As you face each challenge, you take one step closer to finding purpose and balance in your new way of life.