

Mourning the Death of a Spouse

When your spouse dies, your world changes. You are in mourning—feeling grief and sorrow at the loss. You may feel numb, shocked, and fearful. You may feel guilty for being the one who is still alive. If your spouse died in a nursing home, you may wish that you had been able to care for him or her at home. At some point, you may even feel angry at your spouse for leaving you. All these feelings are normal. There are no rules about how you should feel. There is no right or wrong way to mourn.

When you grieve, you can feel both physical and emotional pain. People who are grieving often cry easily and can have:

- Trouble sleeping
- Little interest in food
- Problems with concentration
- A hard time making decisions

If you are grieving, in addition to dealing with feelings of loss, you may also need to put your own life back together. This can be hard work. Some people may feel better sooner than they expect. Others may take longer. As time passes, you may still miss your spouse, but for most people, the intense pain will lessen. There will be good and bad days. You will know that you are feeling better when the good days begin to outnumber the bad.

For some people, mourning can go on so long that it becomes unhealthy. This can be a sign of serious depression and anxiety. If sadness keeps you from carrying on with your day-to-day life, talk to your doctor.

What Can You Do?

In the beginning, you may find that taking care of details and keeping busy helps. For a while, family and friends may be around to assist you. But, there comes a time when you will have to face the change in your life.

Here are some ideas to keep in mind:

- **Take care of yourself.** Grief can be hard on your health. Try to eat right, make exercise a part of your daily routine, take your medicine, and get enough sleep. Bad habits, such as drinking too much alcohol or smoking, can put your health at risk. Keep up with your usual visits to your healthcare provider.
- **Talk to caring friends.** Let family and friends know when you want to talk about your husband or wife. It may help to be with people who let you say what you're feeling.
- **Join a grief support group.** Sometimes it helps to talk to people who are also grieving. Check with hospitals, religious communities, and local agencies to find out about support groups.
- **Try not to make any major changes right away.** It's a good idea to wait for a while before making big decisions like moving or changing jobs.
- **See your doctor.** If you're having trouble taking care of your everyday activities, like getting dressed or fixing meals, talk to your healthcare provider.
- **Don't be afraid to seek professional help.** Sometimes short-term talk therapy with a counselor can help.
- **Remember your children are grieving, too.** You may find that your relationship with your children has changed. It will take time for the whole family to adjust to life without your spouse.
- **Mourning takes time.** It's common to have rollercoaster emotions for a while.

Do Men and Women Feel the Same Way?

Andrew, age 73, felt like the wind had been knocked out of him when his wife died. He began sleeping all day and staying up at night watching TV. Meals were mostly snacks like cookies and chips. He knew it wasn't healthy, but he didn't know what to do. Across town, Alice woke up in a panic. It had been 5 weeks since Jeff, her husband of 41 years, died. She cared for him during his long illness. How was she going to cope with the loneliness?

Men and women share many of the same feelings when their spouse dies. Both may deal with the pain of loss, and both may worry about the future. But, there can also be differences. Often, married couples divide up their household tasks. One person may pay bills and handle car repairs. The other person may cook meals and mow the lawn. Splitting up jobs often works well until there is only one person who has to do it all. Learning to manage new tasks, from chores to household repairs to finances, takes time, but it can be done.

Being alone can increase concerns about safety. It's a good idea to make sure there are working locks on the doors and windows. If you need help, ask your family or friends.

Facing the future without a husband or wife can be scary. Many people have never lived alone. Those who are both widowed and retired may feel very lonely and become depressed. Talk to your doctor about how you are feeling.

Taking Charge of Your Life

After years of being part of a couple, it can be upsetting to be alone. Many people find it helps to have things to do every day. Write down your weekly plans. You might:

- Take a walk with a friend.
- Go to the library to check out books.
- Volunteer at a local school as a tutor or playground aide.
- Join a community exercise class or a senior swim group.
- Join a singing group.
- Sign up for bingo or bridge at a nearby recreation center.
- Think about a part-time job.
- Join a bowling league.
- Offer to watch your grandchildren.
- Consider adopting a pet.
- Take a class from the recreation center or local college.
- Learn a new skill.

Some widowed people lose interest in cooking and eating. It may help to have lunch with friends at a senior center or cafeteria. Sometimes eating at home alone feels too quiet. Turning on a radio or TV during meals can help. For information on nutrition and cooking for one, look for helpful books at your local library or bookstore.

Is There More To Do?

When you feel stronger, you should think about:

- Writing a new will
- Looking into a durable power of attorney for legal matters and a power of attorney for health care in case you are unable to make your own medical decisions
- Putting joint property (such as a house or car) in your name
- Checking on your health insurance as well as your current life, car, and homeowner's insurance
- Signing up for Medicare by your 65th birthday
- Making a list of bills you will need to pay in the next few months; for instance, State and Federal taxes, rent, or mortgage

When you are ready, go through your husband's or wife's clothes and other personal items. It may be hard to give away these belongings. Instead of parting with everything at once, you might make three piles: one to keep, one to give away, and one "not sure." Ask your children or others to help. Think about setting aside items like a special piece of clothing, watch, favorite book, or picture to give to your children or grandchildren as personal reminders of your spouse.

What About Going Out?

Lillian felt lost. Widowed at age 71, she went out with the same couples that she and her husband, Ray, had always liked. But without Ray, she felt out of place. How could she enjoy going out when she felt like a fifth-wheel?

Having a social life can be tough. It may be hard to think about going to parties alone. It can be hard to think about coming home alone. You may be anxious about dating. Many people miss the feeling of closeness that marriage brings. After time, some are ready to have a social life again.

Here are some things to remember:

- Go slowly. There's no rush.
- It's okay to make the first move when it comes to planning things to do.
- Try group activities. Invite friends for a potluck dinner or go to a senior center.
- With married friends, think about informal outings like walks or picnics rather than couples events that remind you of the past.
- Find an activity you like. You may have fun and meet people who like to do the same thing.
- Many people find that pets provide important companionship.
- You can develop meaningful relationships with friends and family members of all ages.

Don't Forget

Take care of yourself. Get help from your family or professionals if you need it. Be open to new experiences. Don't feel guilty if you laugh at a joke or enjoy a visit with a friend. You are adjusting to life without your spouse.

Timetable for Grief

One of the most frequently asked questions is: "How long will these feelings last?" The following guidelines are general descriptions and may vary widely from one individual to another.

- ◇ **Month one:** In the first month, grieving persons may be so busy with funeral arrangements, visitors, paperwork and other immediate tasks that they have little time to begin the grieving process. They may also be numb and feel that the loss is unreal. This shock can last beyond the first month if the death was sudden, violent or particularly untimely.
- ◇ **Month three:** the three month point is a particularly challenging time for many grieving persons. Visitors have gone home, cards and calls have pretty much stopped coming in, and most of the numbness has worn off. Well-meaning family and friends who do not understand the grief process may pressure the grieving person to get back to normal. The grieving person is just beginning the very painful task of understanding what this loss really means.
- ◇ **Month four through twelve:** The grieving person continues to work through the many tasks of learning to live with the loss. There begin to be more good days than bad days. Difficult periods will crop up sometimes with no obvious trigger, even late into the last half of the first year. It is important that the grieving person understands that these difficult periods are normal, rather than a set back or a sign of lack of progress.
- ◇ **Significant anniversaries:** During the first year, personal and public holidays present additional challenges. Birthdays (of the deceased and other family members), wedding anniversaries, and family and school reunions can be difficult periods. Medical anniversaries, such as the day of the diagnosis, the day someone was hospitalized or came home from the hospital can also bring up memories. The grieving person may not be consciously keeping track of these dates, but is still affected by them.
- ◇ **The one year anniversary of the death:** Reactions to the anniversary of the death may begin days or weeks before the actual date. Many people describe reliving those last difficult days. Even individuals who have been doing very well toward the end of the first year are affected. People generally welcome additional acknowledgment or support during anniversaries.
- ◇ **The Second year:** Most grieving people agree that it takes at least two years to start feeling like they have established workable new routines and a new identity without the deceased person. Many of the tasks of the second year have to do with re-assessing goals, discovering a new identity and creating a different life style.