

Grieving the Loss of Your Spouse

Reactions to a Spouse's Death

If your spouse has died, you will probably experience some of the common symptoms of grief. You may find yourself denying at first that your spouse has died. Later, you may feel numb or like a spectator watching what's going on. This is nature's way of protecting you, of insulating you from what is happening so you can adjust.

Anger and Guilt

You may also find yourself filled with anger. You may feel angry at the doctors or nurses who couldn't save your spouse, at the funeral director - even God. You may feel angry at your spouse for leaving you and then feel guilty for this anger.

You may find yourself feeling guilty for a number of reasons. It is common for the bereaved to feel guilty simply for being alive... you may believe you somehow should have prevented the death or been present to say good-bye. Because relationships are never perfect, you were bound to have had some disagreements with your spouse. Now you may feel guilty for those arguments, or believe you should have been a "better" husband or wife.

Other Signs of Grief

Those who have lost a spouse frequently become preoccupied with the person who died. You may think about your spouse constantly, re-create the circumstances of the death over and over in your mind, and have dreams or nightmares about him or her. You may even think you see or hear your spouse.

Many people are surprised and frightened by the intensity of these reactions. "Grief feels like craziness to the person who's undergoing it," explains Therese Rando, a psychologist. Dr. Rando says it is important to realize that, bizarre as they may seem, these reactions are normal.

The mental strain of grief can take a physical toll as well. It's not unusual for the bereaved to lose weight, have difficulty sleeping, become irritable or listless, or feel short of breath. Grief has even been known to cause hair loss.

Secondary Losses

As the reality of death sinks in, it is common for a bereaved spouse to slip into depression and to feel helpless or childlike. Dr. Rando explains that when you lose a spouse, you also experience "secondary losses" that accrue because of the death. Those secondary losses depend partly on your age. Younger couples increasingly depend on two paychecks to maintain the household. The death of one spouse can leave the other in a tight financial situation. Younger couples are also likely to have children at home and depend on each other to share the child-rearing duties.

Some women are more likely to depend on their husbands to make financial decisions, get the car fixed and keep the house in good repair. Likewise, many men depend on their wives to cook, clean and otherwise manage the household.

Losing such an important companion can leave you feeling confused and panicky at any age. For this reason, you should delay, if possible, making any major decisions; try to postpone them until you can think more clearly and have a better idea of how your life is going to change.

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Perhaps the most difficult secondary loss to accept is suddenly being without your primary companion. You have grown accustomed to living a certain life-style and engaging in favorite activities with your spouse. You have grown used to being the object of your spouse's love. As Dr. Rando says, a woman who is widowed, for example, "didn't just lose her husband, she lost a friend, a confidant, someone with whom to take vacations."

The death of your spouse can also change the relationship you had with mutual friends. If you were used to socializing with friends as a couple, those same friends may have a difficult time interacting with you as an individual. You may begin to feel like the "fifth wheel."

Coping With Your Grief

How can you overcome the problems you face after your spouse has died? First, you must recognize that grief is necessary, and that it is something you must work through; there is no shortcut.

Vent Your Feelings

It is important that you express your feelings. Take time to cry, and don't be afraid to share your tears with other mourners. Talk openly with family members and friends. Don't try to "protect" your children or other family members by hiding your sadness. Express your anger if you are feeling it. This is the time to lean on your friends. They may feel awkward for awhile because they don't know how to talk to you about your loss. You can help them help you by simply telling them what you need.

Lighten Your Schedule

If you normally have a pressing schedule, try to lighten it. Remember, grief is mentally taxing; you don't need the added strain of too much to do. Set aside some quiet times just for yourself, so you can think about your spouse's death and put things in perspective.

There is No Time Table...

What if you can't seem to handle your grief? Dr. Rando emphasizes that there is no time table for grief, so it is difficult to say when a person needs professional help. If you are worried that you are not coping well with your grief, you might consider talking to a counselor. You may be relieved to discover that you are reacting normally. If you believe you need help, ask your clergy person or doctor to suggest a counselor. Your funeral director can also offer valuable advice.

Remember, You Will Adjust...

Finally, remember that as time goes on, you will adjust to your new life, and your grief will diminish. This does not mean you must forget your loved one; it means you accept the death and can no longer enjoy your spouse's physical presence. But he or she will still be part of your life. Your relationship with your spouse has been changed forever, but its existence and your feelings live on forever.

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