

Surviving the Loss of a Spouse

It was very, very hard to go to work and come home to my house when the sun was going down. That was the hardest thing to handle...coming back to that empty house up on a hill in the country, unlocking the door, and walking in... Widow

The house isn't even a house without her. I can't look forward to her coming home...walking in. I'm just getting through the days one at a time the best I can. We were married for thirty-eight years. It's like part of me is missing. Widower

When surviving spouses share their feelings following the death of a husband or wife, they usually speak of the extremely debilitating effects of feeling *alone* and *incomplete*. This sense of having lost an essential part of yourself is painful and disorienting. The immediate world often seems odd and distanced. You are not sure how to cope with life in general. Sometimes you may not be sure you want to try.

During the period immediately following your spouse's death, you will most likely experience a depressed mood, prolonged and excessive crying, and insomnia. As sadness, despair and exhaustion pervade your daily life, you may also feel a futility that affects you physically and emotionally.

Survivors react to the loss of a spouse in innumerable ways. Your own feelings and concerns are influenced by your personality, your unique characteristics, the nature of your marital relationship, the duration of your marriage, the cause of your spouse's death, previous losses you have endured, and your age and gender.

Feelings and Concerns Following the Death of a Spouse

In addition to reporting that they felt incomplete and alone, surviving spouses summed up their major feelings and concerns in the following statements:

I feel as if I have lost my best friend. When your spouse has also been your best friend, you experience a loss that has many components: the loss of a companion with whom you shared activities; you had a language that was familiar and shared by each other; you received daily (nonsexual) physical contact to which you may have become so accustomed, you didn't miss it until was gone; and you were the recipient of the kind of loyalty that is provided by a best friend - one of trusted supporter and "co-conspirator who back you up, explained you to others and served, if necessary, as your active defender.

I am angry. When someone you trust, interact with and depend on has left you alone, it is natural for you to feel abandoned. Some surviving spouses are successful in convincing themselves that their husband or wife died on purpose, deliberately and mercilessly leaving them in a state of loneliness, disarray and confusion.

I feel guilty about something (or many things) I did. You may feel guilty about being too quick to criticize, about being disloyal, about not earning enough, or about being a poor listener. A spouse can feel guilty about anything. A survivor who is suddenly the recipient of death benefits can feel a tremendous amount of guilt caused by financial gain. Regardless of the reason for the guilt, every guilt arises from one of two premises: 1) that you would have made your spouse's life *happier* if you had done a certain thing, or 2) that if you had not done one thing, another thing would not have occurred; that is, if you had done or not done something you spouse *would not have died*. Many assumptions are based on the belief that your actions would have made all the difference. This belief leads to the issue of personal control. By feeling guilty you are making yourself believe that you had control over the death. Having the conviction that you are guilty is preferable to accepting the fact that death is beyond your control. *Now I think about my own death more frequently.* Because your spouse's life ended against your will, you realize that your own life can do the same. Your mortality is underscored, and your death may seem to be approaching rapidly. Even though your death is not any more imminent than it ever was, you may find yourself thinking about it more than ever.

I feel very old. Usually the feeling of being very old accompanies the preoccupation with death. Worse yet, if you are experiencing this feeling, your "oldness" is reinforced on a daily basis through the lithe-bodied, younger generation featured in billboard, magazine and newspaper advertising as well as TV commercials.

I feel sick all the time. Insomnia, extreme tiredness, anorexia, headaches, indigestion, chest pains, and heart palpitations are many of the symptoms reported by survivors. When your general health changes, there naturally occurs a reduced capacity to care for yourself, to carry on with domestic chores or a job. In this sense, your perception of self-worth becomes suddenly and drastically changed. So the problem of poor health ultimately affects all aspects of life – psychological, emotional, social and mental.

I am afraid. Fear may be a strong reaction during the first few months after the death of a spouse. You may fear taking care of yourself or fear being emotionally alone for the rest of your life. You may fear shopping alone, driving by yourself, or sleeping in your house alone.

I worry about money. More often than not, financial matters are not in order when a spouse dies. And when the spouse who dies has been the financial planner and money manager, the surviving spouse may not be aware of the location, amount and distribution of resources. Even if financial matters have been attended to, they may be shockingly insufficient. Additionally, from the surviving spouse's point of view, property may be inequitably or irrationally distributed among the survivors. Financial complications or insufficient resources can produce a variety of reactions in the spouse survivor, including anxiety, fear, shame, and anger. For some, emotional energy can be completely consumed by the economics of survival.

I'm going through an identity crisis. The surviving spouse is no longer a "couple." He or she is a single individual who now reminds others that their own "couple-ness" may be in jeopardy. A widow or widower is a visual reminder that one half of a couple is now missing. As a result, the surviving spouse may experience a new kind of loneliness that comes from being excluded from dinner parties, bridge nights, tennis games, group camping trips or senior citizen couples' functions. Weekends or nights that were once spent with other couples are now spent alone. Surviving spouses often feel different without their spouse and often remove themselves from former friends. Additionally, surviving spouses often find it emotionally easier to interact with new people or those friends who didn't know the deceased spouse.

I feel relieved after the death. Surviving spouses may experience relief when their spouse was terminally ill and experiencing great distress, their spouse was an accident victim whose injuries had reduced life to nothing more than existence; the deceased spouse was abusive, or their spouse was suffering from a chronic addiction that made it impossible to have a quality relationship. A feeling of relief is not easily admitted and is difficult to bear because it brings with it the burden of guilt and often the confusion generated by the spouse's own unacceptable reactions.

How To Cope With Your Loss

It is imperative to recognize that healing cannot take place if you do not express what you are feeling and thinking as a result of your loss. Both positive and negative responses need to be shared. You will benefit by talking of your loneliness. Allow yourself to talk about the type of person your husband or wife was, about things your spouse did and said, and about the activities, interests, qualities and opinions the two of you shared. You may feel ambivalence about some aspect of your life together. You may want to vent your anger.

I thought I knew how to handle it. I knew I was going to go through anger. I knew I was going to go through periods of being vulnerable. Even though I intellectualized it, I still had to go through it and experience it. I made myself sick physically because I wasn't letting my feelings out.

Widow

While expressions of grief are of equal importance to widows and widowers, societal expectations make it more difficult for the widower to discuss or convey his feelings or concerns. Unfortunately, very real consequences emerge from not expressing feelings. Studies have shown the mortality rate is higher among those who do not exhibit grief. Some survivors ask, "How long will I want to talk about this? What is normal?" The answer is that you may want to talk about your loss for a very long time. Talk about it as long as you like and as much as you like. Stop only when you don't want to talk anymore. For some people, this will be six months. For others, it will be two years or longer.

Identify an appropriate listener – someone who is nonjudgmental, accepting, able to hear the bad as well as the good, and is not afraid of anger. A listener who is not helpful is someone who says that talking doesn't do any good; counsels not be weak; urges the spouse to think of others who are worse off; sees the female's expression of anger as "unladylike," not maternal, frightening, or sexually unattractive; sees the male's expression of sadness, longing, or despair as being unmanly, a waste of time, an indication of impending collapse; or urges the spouse to focus on tomorrow and forget the past.

From: Beyond Grief by Carol Staudacher, 1987.

If you need additional information regarding spousal loss and grief, or just need to talk to someone, please give us call at anytime, at Abbey Hospice, 770-464-5858.