Coping with the Death of a Spouse

The death of a spouse can be one of the most painful events a person ever experiences. The loss of your spouse can mean the loss of your partner, lover, best friend, confidant, and the parent of your children. In addition to dealing with the loss emotionally, a surviving spouse often faces major life changes that can be stressful. Coping with the loss of your spouse involves working through the emotional grief while adjusting to new circumstances.

What to expect

Stages of grief

Everyone grieves differently, but there are some common emotional transitions that are often referred to as the “stages of grief.” You may experience some or all of the following:

- **Shock or denial.** One of the first emotions that many people feel is disbelief. You might feel numb or think, “This isn’t possible” or “There has been some kind of mistake.” Pretending that something so horrible isn’t true sometimes allows a little more time to transition to an unwelcome reality, especially if the loss is unexpected.

- **Anger.** It’s common to have feelings of anger. You may be angry at the bearer of bad news or even at your spouse for leaving you. It is also common to be angry at a doctor for being unable to save your spouse or at a higher power for not protecting her. Anger is a normal response to the death of a loved one. It’s perfectly understandable to want to try to find out whose fault the loss was and whether it could have been prevented.

- **Bargaining.** In this stage, you might seek to negotiate the return of your spouse no matter how unrealistic these kinds of thoughts may be. For example, some people beg a higher power for more time with their spouse, promising something in exchange. Sometimes this stage is referred to as the “if onlys.” For example, you may think that if only the doctor or you had done something differently, your spouse may have survived.

- **Sadness.** Many people experience deep sadness when the full weight of what has happened sinks in. Suddenly or gradually, you will see that you can’t change the situation and will begin to understand what it will mean to go through life without the person you love. You may feel very sad and maybe even guilty about not being there to say goodbye to your spouse or things you wish you had done differently in your relationship.
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• Acceptance. At some point, you will accept your loss and begin to adjust to the new chapter in your life. Memories start making you smile instead of break into tears. You might even experience a sense of peace that comes with acceptance.

All of these feelings are normal. However, it is important to remember that there is no set process for grief. Each person’s experience is unique. You might find that you skip some of these stages or experience more than one stage at a time -- sometimes in the same day.

There isn’t a time table for “getting over” a spouse’s death. The pain usually lessens over time but it may never go away completely. Feelings of grief may resurface on holidays, on your anniversary, or when you visit a place that was special to the two of you. Seek help if painful feelings don’t lessen over time or if they seem more than you can bear. A counselor or therapist can help you to work through this difficult grief process.

Changes

One of the most difficult parts of grieving the loss of a spouse is learning to live with the resulting changes. The transition from being part of a couple to being a single, separate person can be painful and frustrating. You are facing a new set of problems alone instead of handling situations with your spouse. If the loss of your spouse was anticipated, perhaps you already have some plans in place. If the death of your spouse was sudden and unexpected, it might be a while before you become aware of all of the changes that will take place.

It can be frightening when you don’t know what to expect or your circumstances suddenly change. You may experience

• Financial changes. Depending on your financial situation, you may have to rework your budget to make ends meet. Some surviving spouses decide to work full time if they worked part time or didn’t work before. Some look for a more affordable home to meet their financial needs. Evaluate your entire financial situation as well as your emotional state before making any big changes. Talk with your financial planner to map out necessary adjustments.

• New location. Some surviving spouses move for a new job, to be closer to family, or to a home that is more affordable or easier to maintain. A move can be a big change, whether it’s within the same community or to another state. Many experts suggest that you try to put off big changes such as a move until you’ve had a chance to adapt to your new situation. If you decide to move, enlist the help of trusted friends or family members. In addition to helping you with the move itself, they can help you search for a new home and locate important resources (such as mail-forwarding forms or phone service companies in your new area).
• **Learning new skills.** It can be overwhelming and confusing to try to take care of everything your spouse was responsible for. You may have to learn to cook, mow the lawn, clean, make repairs, care for children, or balance the checkbook. Accept or ask for help as you learn how to handle things on your own.

• **Redefining yourself.** You are used to being the most important person in your spouse’s life. You’re used to living a certain way and sharing favorite activities with your spouse. Now your identity is changing. You may have to re-establish your goals, values, and priorities in light of your changed circumstances. It is normal to start questioning who you are or what you enjoy in addition to what you used to do because of your spouse’s interest and what you did for yourself.

• **Social changes.** Some of your relationships may have been based on the fact that you were a couple. The friends you socialized with as a couple may feel awkward around you as an individual or because they don’t know what to say about your spouse’s death. Try to focus on relationships that remain supportive. You might even establish a new friendship with someone who has had a similar experience.

• **Parenting changes.** If you have children, you are now experiencing life as a single parent. Lean on your support network as you make this difficult transition. Join a single parent support group. Other parents may be able give you ideas and advice on everything from finding backup child care in your area to discipline.

As you begin to piece together a life without your spouse, avoid making big changes too fast. For example, you may want to move immediately because it’s too painful to be in the home you shared with your spouse. But this may not be the best option financially. Take your time when making changes and decisions and get help from friends and family whenever you need it, especially if there are decisions that need to be made right away.

**Tips on coping**
There’s no right way to grieve. Each person’s experience is different, and each person copes in his own way. Here are some ideas that can help you cope with your loss:

• **Allow yourself to hurt.** It is important to your healing process that you acknowledge the grief you are experiencing. Let yourself cry if you feel like it. Crying is a healthy way to release emotion and to relieve tension. It can also be a way of actively working through your pain. There are no shortcuts -- the only way through your grief is to allow yourself to feel the full range of emotions at a pace that feels right to you.

• **Lean on the people you love and who love you.** Grief is often easier to bear when shared with someone. Talk to your close friends or family members about how you are feeling, about your favorite memories with your spouse, and about what you will miss about your spouse. Surround yourself with compassionate people
who allow you to grieve in your own way. Avoid confiding in people who try to provide quick fixes for your grief, such as “Just get over it” or “At least you’re young enough to marry again.” While these people might mean well, they may not know what to say, and their words can be very painful. Instead, choose to spend time with people who are supportive and helpful.

- **Ask for help when you need it.** Chances are your friends and family members want to help, but they may feel awkward because they don’t know how to talk with you about your loss and they aren’t sure what they can do to help. Let them know what you need, whether it’s someone to listen or help cooking a meal when you just don’t have the energy to do it yourself.

- **Move on at your own pace.** Some people may urge you to put your spouse’s belongings away or to remove your wedding band. Do these things when you are ready, not on someone else’s schedule. No one else shared the same relationship with your spouse. As a result, your grief is entirely unique. Take your time and move through your grief in a way that feels right for you.

- **Consider your spirituality.** You may find it comforting to talk with your spiritual leader or a friend who shares your faith about the role your spirituality is playing in your life and feelings right now.

- **Express yourself.** Many people find it helpful to write about their feelings in a journal, which can be as effective as talking with someone about them. Write a letter to your spouse to express the things you never shared but wish you had. Tell your spouse how much she means to you or what you would do differently if you had the chance. This is a great way to express things left unsaid, especially if you didn’t get a chance to say goodbye. You may also be able to release pent up emotions through art or music.

- **Take care of yourself.** Make sure to continue to eat right and to get enough sleep. Also, make an effort to get exercise, even when you don’t feel like it. Take a brief walk outside every day if possible. Fresh air, sunlight, and exposure to the natural world can be very calming during a difficult time.

- **Prepare for holidays and other special events.** Even though your grief will lessen, it may resurface from time to time, especially during special holidays. Talk to family members about how traditions might change now that your spouse is gone. You might decide to hold a holiday meal at someone else’s home or make a special toast in memory of your spouse.

- **Avoid unhealthy coping strategies.** Alcohol and drugs may seem to help at first, but they may contribute to depressed feelings or just mask the grief and delay the grieving process.

- **Cherish your memories of your spouse.** If there were certain places or events you enjoyed together, make a photo album or scrapbook of them. If your spouse loved roses, plant a rose bush in his honor. Memorialize your spouse by donating
a bench to his favorite park or by starting a scholarship fund in his name if he valued education. Support an organization that was important to him. These actions can help you feel like your spouse’s memory will live on and remind you that his life had meaning.

- **Talk to a counselor or therapist.** A counselor or therapist can provide additional support and can help you to gain a sense of control and to work through your feelings of grief. Talking to a counselor or therapist can also help you to bring closure to unresolved issues you may have had in your relationship with your spouse. Contact your health care provider or the program that sent you this article to locate one in your area.

- **Attend a support group.** Support groups can provide emotional support and can help you understand what to expect after your loss. They also help you see that you are not alone. Other people in a support group will truly understand and sympathize because they have experienced a similar loss. Counselors, spiritual leaders, or health care providers in your area might be able to locate a support group near you.

**If you have children**

If you have children, you will need to help them to grieve while you are facing the difficult task yourself. Here are some tips to help:

- **Encourage your child to talk about her feelings.** Listen to what your child is saying and be supportive. Help her to match words to feelings. Answer any questions she might have. Your child may have a lot of questions now and later as she begins to understand death better. Be careful not to overwhelm her with excessive detail, but give simple, basic answers. Be honest in your responses and use words that she is able to understand.

- **Don’t hide your sadness.** Show your child that it is OK to express his feelings by stating how you feel. Don’t, however, vent frustration to him or overburden him with your sadness. Talk to an adult friend or family member when you need to lean on someone.

- **Try to maintain a routine.** Routines are very comforting for both children and adults. Keeping up an old routine can help your child to feel secure when so many things are changing. Continue to eat dinner together, follow the same bedtime routine, and maintain the same general schedule you followed before your spouse’s death. If you need help driving your child places, cooking dinner, or with anything else, ask a close friend or relative to lend a hand.

- **Let your child’s teachers or caregivers know what has happened.** They can be alert for signs that your child needs help coping and provide extra support during this difficult time.
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• Show your child that you are still there to take care of her. After losing one parent, your child may fear losing you. Spend time with your child and provide reassurance. Younger children may need extra cuddling from you to feel secure.

• Understand that children have unique ways of grieving, too. Older children may retreat or not want to talk about their parent because it’s too painful. Younger children may not fully understand what has happened or need extra love and support. Children can experience the same grief stages as adults, so watch your child carefully to see what he needs from you and others right now and in the future.

You may also want to consider getting professional help for your child. Losing a parent can be a traumatic event for a child of any age. A professional counselor or therapist can help your child learn ways to cope with this enormous loss.

Looking forward
You will probably never stop missing your spouse, but that doesn’t mean that you can’t go on to live a fulfilling life. While your future might look different than you originally anticipated, it can still be enjoyable, interesting, and exciting. It may seem hard to believe at first, but someday you will be able to tell someone else that there is hope, that you will survive, and that life does go on.

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