



The world suddenly looks like a different place, often odd and distanced.



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On the Loss of a Spouse

Adapted from the original by Dr. Bill Webster

1. Dealing with a devastating loss

A 50/50 chance, to any gambler, is a pretty good bet. But did you ever stop to think that if you are in a significant relationship, there is a 50/50 chance that you will eventually grieve the loss of your partner.

Listen to some of the stories of people who experienced the loss of a spouse.

"I would go to work and it would seem that everything was the same as it had always been. But then I would come home. WOW! Just walking into that empty house. Nobody to say hello or ask me how I got on that day. No delicious aroma of supper in the oven... I was missing what I had lost...not just my wife, but also the person who used to look after me." —Michael

"The days that followed his death were both utterly full and completely empty...full of activity yet empty of life. Much of the time I sleep walked through the things I had to do, so numb that I was often completely unaware of what was going on around me. I felt like Pinocchio must have felt inside of the whale...cut off from everything that I thought was my life." —Robyn

A common theme among people who have lost their spouse is the debilitating sense of feeling alone and incomplete, like you have lost an essential part of yourself. The world suddenly looks like a different place, often odd and distanced. Unsure how to cope with life in general, you may sometimes even wonder if you even want to try.

Some common feelings and concerns include:

- I felt like I lost my best friend.
- I am angry.
- I feel guilty that I didn't do enough for him/her.
- I am afraid.
- I worry about lots of things, especially money.
- Suddenly, I feel very old.
- I feel sick all the time.
- I think about my own death more frequently.
- I seem to be going through an identity crisis.
- I feel relieved that his suffering is over, then immediately guilty for feeling that way.

Behind each of these statements is a feeling that communicates what the person is missing and offers an opportunity to facilitate healing.

“How long should I talk about this? What is normal?”

2. Where healing begins

Remember, that which cannot be put into words, cannot be put to rest. Healing cannot take place without expressing what you are feeling and thinking as a result of your loss. A support group can play such a vital role, providing opportunities to talk about the person, their life as well as their death, what you miss about them, your feelings of loneliness, anger and many others, and to review the final days of their life and your relationship.

There are very real consequences from not expressing feelings. Studies clearly show that mortality rates are higher among those who do not articulate their grief. This may also account for the much higher rate of males who die within a year of their spouse, due to the societal norms that make it more difficult for men to express emotions. Even when there is some ambivalence about certain aspects of the life shared, it is important to verbalize your anger or your regret about what you lost and never had, or about what could or should have been.

Some survivors ask, “How long should I talk about this? What is normal?” This concern is often motivated by the fact that within a few weeks or months of the death, others seem reluctant to talk about it. After all, their life has returned to normal. But the widow or widower needs to talk about it, because it just feels unbelievable. Life will never be “normal” again (even though a new definition of normality will be established eventually). So some grieving people need to talk for six months, but for others it can be two years or longer. Everyone needs and deserves to follow their own timeline.

Four areas of special concern

Over the years, I have noted four situations particularly affecting grieving spouses that require an inordinate amount of personal courage:

1. Coping with persistent unpleasant memories
2. Avoiding certain rooms or situations in the house
3. Experiencing hallucinations where the dead spouse is seen or heard
4. Dealing with their spouse’s personal effects (clothes, tools)

Unpleasant memories most often relate to the painful images surrounding the death, and the frustration of not being able to “do” anything to change the outcome. Often through a life-threatening illness, a relationship will peak in one direction or another; a good relationship will tend to get better, a poor relationship will tend to get worse. This actually magnifies the loss, either by the person missing all the things done and shared through the illness, or by feelings of regret that they did not do enough.

If the person is avoiding sleeping in their own bed, or steering clear of certain areas of the house, don’t consider this behavior unusual or pathological. They are merely protecting themselves from stress. Perhaps that location is a too painful reminder of the death or expresses a concern as to how they will manage.

Hallucinations (or however we choose to define these experiences) have a wide range of explanations. Is it a visitation of the person’s spirit or is it sensory recall? I try not



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to attempt to explain it, rather asking how the survivor felt after the experience. Almost always, the person feels reassured, relieved, comforted. It hardly matters whether it is a dream, a hallucination or a visitation; to argue misses the point.

Dealing with a spouse's personal effects is something many survivors procrastinate over. Sometimes this has to do with an understandably low physical energy and emotional stamina. You may not know who to give them to or what to do with them. That is OK. Do nothing until you are sure that you feel comfortable with what will happen, even if that takes several months or longer. When you do decide, ask a friend or family member to assist, or even just to be there and talk to you while you do it. Maybe there will be things that you simply do not want to discard or give away—keep them.

Remember, it doesn't hurt anyone or anything to leave your spouse's things right where they are. Don't allow anyone to force you into dealing with things until you are ready, sure and comfortable.

3. Rebuilding a life

The surviving individual must convert the mourning process into a nurturing process as they seek to rebuild and reorganize a life where one half of them is missing.

An often-overlooked aspect of losing a spouse is the change in identity the survivor experiences. We tend to define ourselves by our relationships, our work, our activities and involvements. Many couples define themselves as just that... a couple. Admittedly the degree of change will be determined by the complexity of the relationship. The more dependency the person had on their spouse and the role as husband or wife, the greater the void now that the role is no longer there.

Listen to the comments of one widow:

"For almost a year after Jim's death, I thought of myself as only his husband. I had invested my whole self in him. I had to think, NO, I didn't give him all I had, I LOANED it to him. Now I needed to reclaim it, take it back, because I needed it for myself."

Before you are able to reclaim, you have to identify and redefine, "Who am I NOW" in light of my loss. People who get involved, whether in necessary tasks like looking after children, family or work, or by involvements in the community, groups, activities, find that these things increase self-esteem and energy as they enhance the person's identity. Again, social clubs or support groups can provide a good bridge to help the person develop skills, or at least feel more comfortable in such situations.

Michael, almost a year after his wife died, said:

"I think the difference between a male's grief and that of a female is a cultural thing. Men are not as social as women. I mean I have friends, but when we sit down for a drink or something we talk about business or sports or activities. Men aren't really taught to relate their feelings, or emotions, and certainly not their vulnerabilities. So, when my wife died, my friends didn't know what to say, as if they were afraid to ask me how I was feeling."



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4. The physical impact of grief

Physical health is another area that concerns many people. Suppressed emotions can contribute to physiological symptoms, which can have serious consequences. Health doesn't just happen! It involves exercise, good nutrition and avoiding excessive caffeine, alcohol and other drugs.

"The last thing in the world I wanted to do was eat. Everyone kept urging me to "eat something" so if someone was there or watching me, I would eat something to please them. But when I was alone, I ate nothing. In the first month after my husband's death, I lost 20 pounds. It wasn't till I started walking daily with my neighbor that my normal appetite returned."

Insomnia is another major symptom of conjugal bereavement. This can be aided by what we do and what we consume in the hours before going to bed. But many males experience other physical symptoms.

Michael said, *"I've noticed some changes in my health. Particularly in my stomach ... pains, indigestion, and other symptoms. My doctor indicated that often men experience physiological reactions to the emotional stress of grief. Maybe it's easier for us to say "I have a pain in my stomach" than it is to say, "I have an ache in my heart." But whatever it is, it is important to pay attention to the message."*

5. An environment for healing

Change usually happens from the inside out rather than the other way; however, the more you do to enhance your environment, making it cheerful and pleasant, the more your emotional health will be positively influenced.

I found that after my own wife died, and I was left to raise my two young sons, I had to carefully arrange the surroundings in my home in order to better cope. I put colorful, happy things in the kitchen, where I had my biggest struggles after her death. I put positive, inspiring posters and items in the bedroom, where I felt most lonely. I had one room with pictures and artifacts of our life together, and went there to think about her. When I left that room, I closed the door and focused on all the tasks I had to get on with.

So, add color, brighten the place, tidy up a space for yourself, buy a new chair... the ways to make your daily living more pleasant are innumerable. The positive impact on your emotional well being will be tangible.



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6. Are we healed yet?

There is no set point at which the grieving process is complete. Yet, as we grieve, we can begin to redefine ourselves.

- We'll relinquish old roles and establish new ones.
- We'll develop increasing confidence in our social outlets that satisfy personal needs and coincide with our interests.
- We'll become more able to talk about our loss with relative ease.
- We'll be able to be involved in an activity without being plagued by painful memories and images.
- We'll find ourselves more able to reach out to others, and not be afraid to have fun and even to laugh again.

But it does take time. As one lady put it:

"A year was a big event for me. But once I got through that, I felt like I didn't have to look back. Now I could look forward to see what I could do with what I had left. So I asked myself "What am I going to do with the rest of my life?" I want to do something significant but I'm not exactly sure what just yet. For the first time in my life I can do whatever I want and I plan to make the most of it." ■



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