Coping with the death of a partner or spouse

Most people grieving the death of a partner or spouse say that they have felt confused and often lonely. It is natural to wonder if your thoughts, feelings and behaviors are normal. We hope that you find this booklet helpful.

After the death of your partner or spouse, it may feel very hard to take care of yourself. You may feel vulnerable. Life may feel less certain. It is important, as you adjust to your loss, to remember the value of taking care of yourself.

Breathe.

Emotional pain can affect your breathing. It can cause you to take shallow or uneven breaths. Use a word or mantra as you slowly breathe in through your nose and breathe out through your mouth. Try a phrase like “I am calm” or “courage.” Try to feel your body relax.

Grieve in your own way.

Remind yourself that you have your own needs. Each grief journey is different and there is no map. Be kind to yourself as you make your way.

Keep up your healthy habits.

In the past you made healthy decisions for yourself.

Just for today make an effort to get enough sleep, eat well and exercise. Do something social or creative. Do not have a timeline. Just do what you can each day. Be open to the unexpected. Look for moments of gratitude.

Remember your support system.

There are people who want to support you in this difficult time just as they did in times of joy. They also may be on a grief. Sometimes they may disappoint you. This is not intentional. Find friends who support you.

Take your time.

You can choose when and what to do with your loved one’s items. You can choose how to welcome cherished memories and how to process difficult memories. Take your time as you seek answers. If reading, writing, poetry, or other creative pursuits help, do those things. Talk with people you trust.

Expect changes.

You may have:

- Loss of shared dreams
- Loss of the familiar
- Loss of support systems
- Loss of a sense of security or “center”

When something changes that you did not expect, imagine yourself floating above it. Try to keep your thoughts and feelings in a healthy balance.

Expect a return to happiness.

After the death of a spouse or partner, there may be a time when you laugh or find pleasure and then feel guilt. This is “distorted guilt.” It is like the distortions in a fun-house mirror. The reflection does not match reality.
In reality, moments of happiness, peace and balance will return to your life. Remind yourself to keep an open heart with expectation for the future.

Try to forgive yourself for:
- being angry or disappointed with others, including the one who died and left you.
- being powerless to have prevented the loss.
- everything you wish you had or hadn’t done.

Your grief can be your greatest contribution. You know what it is to be vulnerable and in pain. Let that knowledge open you to others who are hurting.

Let yourself feel good again. Laugh with friends and have fun.

Living your life to the fullest is not betrayal of a memory but the fulfillment of a promise to someone who would want only the best for you.

Be with those who also are grieving. As you tell your stories, you will share an understanding of the heart that is deeper than words.

Learn from those who have experienced healing after loss. Their survival is reassuring proof that you, too, will endure.

Your grieving is among the most sacred and the most human things that you will do. It will plummet you into the mystery of life…and death…and resurrection. Honor it.

Excerpts from Grief Therapy, edited by Karen Katafiasz
Abbey Press, St. Meinrad, Indiana

If you are younger

The death of a life partner or a spouse is hard at any age and in any situation. Becoming widowed when you are younger or your family is young may bring special concerns or questions. Some of these may be:
- Will I be able to provide for myself and my family?
- Will I need to return to work soon after the death? Will I need a new job? Will I need to better equip myself for a different job?
- How will I provide for the daily needs of my children as a single parent?
- Who will support me and my children?
- Who do I call for help with home repairs?
- How will I relate to others as a single person? Will I be able to share feelings with another person? Will I always be alone?
- How will I and my family honor the life of my spouse who has died? How will we keep the memories alive?
- How will I manage stress? How will I stay physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually healthy?

These questions are valid and may stress you. You will need to pay attention to them. They may also guide you as you move through your journey.

Be patient with yourself and with the many feelings that arise. Accept the help of others. This will strengthen your support system. You need support, and others want to give you that support.
Secondary losses of widowhood

The death of someone we love is a primary loss in life.

The losses that happen as a result of death are called secondary losses. As you experience secondary losses, you may grieve them just as you grieve the initial loss of your loved one.

Secondary losses may be:

- Change in family structure. The loss of your spouse and your children’s loss of their parent will change your family structure.
- Change in what seems familiar. There may be changes in the way you relate to other couples, how you share your emotions, or as a partner.
- Change in support system. Some friends may draw back. New friendships may develop. Grief has a way of changing our address books.
- Change in lifestyle. The death of a spouse or partner will mean being single again.
- Change in financial status or stability.
- Change in shared memories of past experiences and in the loss of new memories.
- Change in dreams that were made but not realized. There may be a change of future hopes and goals.
- Change in your understanding of “who you are.”
- Change in your sense of security and trust. You may feel you have less control.
- Change in your responses. You may have less patience, less compassion, less organization or less joy. Trust that balance will return.

That these new feelings are the result of a death. As you continue your grief journey, you will gain a new “normal” in your life.

Adjusting to Grief

Adjusting to grief is a process. At times you may seek out ways to feel more connected with your loved one. At other times you seek to cope by doing daily tasks that allow you to avoid emotional pain.

By going back and forth between focusing on your relationship with the person who died and focusing on your own current needs, you slowly will find a balance.

Although your grief may feel chaotic, it is helpful to move back and forth between approaching and avoiding the pain of your grief.

Ways to focus on coping with your loss

- Express your emotions. Cry or vent.
- Write in a journal.
- Spend quiet time alone.
- Have rituals that honor your loved one.
- Pray or meditate.
- Read books about grief.
- Look at photos of your loved one or items that he or she enjoyed.
- Share stories.
- Go to a grief support group. Spend time with others who support you.

Ways to focus on a new normal

- Focus on daily tasks.
- Take on new roles or duties.
- Do something physical. Walk or garden.
- Look for new relationships or activities.
- Focus on your body. Breathe from your belly. Get enough rest. Eat well.
- Make some financial adjustments and decisions.
- Balance meaningful work and enjoyable activities.
Grief and spirituality

Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D., writes, “I truly believe that acknowledging your heart is broken is the beginning of your healing.”

It takes courage to mourn openly and honestly.

It takes courage to give yourself permission to slow down and turn inward so you can heal your broken heart.

It takes courage to admit that you may not know how to nurture your spirit. You may discover there are many ways people nurture their spirits and find the ways that are right for you.

For some, spirituality is found through organized religion. For others, spirituality does not include organized religion. Each person will define their own spirituality. Your spirituality will be defined by what speaks to your heart and mind.

You may discover spiritual meaning in a faith community or in solitude, in meditation or perhaps in nature. You may find joy in the simple and ordinary. Ask yourself what brings you peace and deepens your connection with your true self.

As hard as the concept of gratitude may be at this time in your life, consider Wolfelt’s words, “When you fill your life with gratitude, you invoke a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

When you allow yourself to feel gratitude, your heart can begin to heal. Grief brings with it a search for the meaning of life and death.

Remember to care for your heart, your mind, and your body. Seek joy and meaning and accept them with an open heart as they come to you.

Ways to remember and celebrate your loved one who has died

Holidays, birthdays and other special days are likely to trigger “waves” of grief. Many grieving people feel that looking forward to special dates and events can be harder than coping with the day itself.

To help you cope, talk with others such as children, family members, friends, support groups and counselors. It can also help to create a healing ritual.

Be gentle with yourself. Do what feels most comfortable for you at this time. Don’t feel pressured to set unrealistic expectations. Emotions are tiring, so balance activity with rest.

Here are some ideas on how to cope with special days. Each family member may find their own special way to cope.

The key to adjusting to a “new normal” in grief is gentle communication and trying out different ways to take care of yourself. Praise yourself and other family members for small gains during these difficult days.

- Plan a favorite meal or dessert.
- Go to his or her favorite restaurant.
- Plant a tree or create a memorial garden. (Winter is a great time of year to look through seed catalogs and plan for spring planting.)
- Look at photos or a video of your loved one.
- Make a quilt, pillow, or stuffed animal out of your partner’s clothes.
- Give a memorial gift in honor of your loved one.
- Read a book of meditations, prayers, or grief support.
More ideas for children, teens and families

- Draw pictures of happy memories.
- Put I love you messages, notes of special memories, or drawings in your loved one’s Christmas stocking or a special memory box.
- Write a poem or story.
- Make up a song about the person who died.
- Play a game, read a book, or watch a funny movie that he or she enjoyed.
- Record special memories on a tape recorder.
- Make a music CD of his or her favorite music or listen to music you find comforting.
- Tell a special friend about your loved one.
- Ask others for an item that belonged to your loved one or a photo to keep for yourself.
- Make a memory book.
- Go on a memory photo outing. Photograph your loved one’s favorite places. Put them in an album. Add captions of memories to the photos.
- Try something new. Plan a special outing or activity for your family to look forward to.
- Remember that it’s okay to have fun. As your family heals, you can start to think about a brighter future.

- Take balloons, ice candles, or flowers to the cemetery or other memorial site.
- Hang a special ornament or wreath.
- Light a candle and say a prayer.
- Create a website in honor of him or her.
- Send a memorial message or photo to the newspaper.
- Volunteer your time or talents in your spouse’s honor.
- Do something you or your loved one enjoyed in their honor. It could be a movie, bowling, hiking, or having a massage.
- Take photos of what gives you hope and strength.

- Take balloons, ice candles, or flowers to the cemetery or other memorial site.
- Hang a special ornament or wreath.
- Light a candle and say a prayer.
- Create a website in honor of him or her.
- Send a memorial message or photo to the newspaper.
- Volunteer your time or talents in your spouse’s honor.
- Do something you or your loved one enjoyed in their honor. It could be a movie, bowling, hiking, or having a massage.
- Take photos of what gives you hope and strength.
When a spouse dies
by John J Reynolds

Few people are prepared for the social, emotional and spiritual upheaval that can accompany grief following the death of a spouse. Regardless of the duration of the marriage the death of a spouse challenges the very fabric of your being.

Younger spouses married only a few years grieve not only the death but the loss of a future filled with hopes and dreams. For those married many years, not only is the death mourned, but also the past that your spouse shared with you.

Next to your parents, your spouse may be your best autobiographer, knowing you far more intimately than others ever could. For those whose parents and many friends have already died, your spouse may have been your only source of support and companionship.

Because almost all marriages will have some degree of conflict and marital tension you may also be left with mixed emotions. These emotions range from guilt, because you may blame yourself for the “differences”, to relief in the case of a spouse who may have been dysfunctional or abusive.

Regardless of the nature of your marital relationship you have been deeply changed by the death of your spouse, forced to adjust to the world as a “single” person. For many this change in identity is pervasive. We live in a couple’s society, bombarded by media images of “couples” sharing in the joys of everyday life.

Following the death of a spouse many people question where they “fit in”. It is not unusual for a bereaved spouse to state, “I feel like a fifth wheel”. In fact, many spouses have told me that some married friends now avoid them.

The loss of companionship, the change in identity and the intense feelings that are a natural part of the grieving process, can all conspire to challenge your sense of confidence and competence in the world. This can leave you feeling frightened, overwhelmed and confused.

Maintaining hope

Given the intensity of all the feelings and adjustments you will endure, there may be times when you despair and wonder what the meaning and purpose of life is without your spouse. As you struggle with these emotions it is important to remember that you will survive.

A number of spouses tell me, “I didn’t think that I could cope alone, but I am.” The truly heroic stories are of personal triumph over loneliness, car repairs, house maintenance, financial decision making, single parenting and working.

As a funeral home aftercare program coordinator, I’ve found the spouses in the funeral home’s support group stand witness to the strength and resilience of the human spirit. To be able to cope with the demands of life while grieving is truly heroic.

To allow yourself the necessary process of entering the pain of your grief, to cry, to despair is not weakness, but strength. To emerge from the shadows of grief to cope with yet another day “to put one foot in front of the other” is heroic.

In fact, the most gratifying part of being a grief counselor is the privilege of knowing so many true heroes and witnessing first hand that the human spirit prevails, even in the face of such personal pain and sorrow.

So it is important to maintain hope and to take advantage of the supports that are available to you. If you are having difficulty coping you may wish to join a support group.

There may be nothing more healing to the wounded spirit of a grieving person than to sit down at a support group to listen and share with others who understand.
Resources

Grief Support Services Library has these titles and others for checkout. Call 218-786-4402 for library hours.

A Decembered Grief  Smith, Harold Ivan
A Grief Observed  Lewis, C.S.
Getting Back to Life when Grief won’t Heal  Kosminsky, Phyllis
Grief Journey  Herschbach, Dennis
When A Man Faces Grief  Golden, Thomas & Miller
When Your Spouse Dies  Tengboom, Mildred
Widow to Widow  Silverman, Phyllis C.
I'm Grieving as Fast as I Can: How Young Widows and Widowers can Cope and Heal  Feinberg, Linda
Healing Grief, Finding Peace: 101 Ways to Cope with the Death of your Loved One  LaGrand, Louis E
Healing a Spouse’s Grieving Heart  Wolfelt, Alan D
Getting to the Other Side of Grief: Overcoming the Loss of a Spouse  Zonnebelt-Smeenge, Susan J & De Vries, Robert
Grieving for Dummies  Harvey, Greg

Essentia Health Grief Support Services offers a variety of grief support groups for children, teens and adults. These support groups are free.

Individual or family grief therapy can be very helpful for those who have experienced sudden or traumatic deaths. Grief therapy can also help when there are multiple losses or life-threatening illnesses.

The Person-to-Person volunteer program matches trained volunteers with individuals or families who have experienced the death of a loved one.

Grief related materials and books are available from the Grief Support Services Library. Call 218.786.4402 or email griefcenter@essentiahealth.org for more information.

Websites

http://essentiahealth.org/StMarysMedicalCenter/GriefSupportCenter.aspx
http://www.centerforloss.com/
http://griefspeaks.com/
http://www.adec.org
http://www.hospicefoundation.org
http://www.griefnet.org
http://www.widownet.org
http://www.cancer.org
Essentia Health St. Mary’s Grief Support Services
407 E 3rd St, Duluth, MN 55805
p 218.786.4402   f 218.786.4067
griefcenter@essentiahealth.org

A charitable project of Essentia Health Foundation
and the St. Mary’s Medical Center Auxiliary.