



LOSS OF A SPOUSE

No event is as devastating as the loss of a spouse. **It requires the greatest life adjustment you will ever face.** Knowing the facts of grief will not make your grieving process less intense. However, understanding that grieving is a normal response to loss allows you to better cope and to experience it without a sense of guilt or weakness. In fact, your grieving is a symbol of your love and tribute to the quality of the relationship you had. To realize that your grieving is as unique as your fingerprint is to give yourself permission to be patient with yourself. You can tell yourself, “I will not always feel as I feel now.”

One of the challenges you will face in working through grief is the endurance it requires. Adjusting to the loss of a spouse will take about three years. It is rarely less and often longer. It takes **time** to learn to live with someone, so it is logical that it also **takes time to learn to live without your spouse.**

The **initial phase of grieving** is characterized by emotions ranging from numbness to deep sadness to anger. You may experience depression, insomnia, shock, frequent crying, rage, a desire for revenge and/or a loss of appetite. Numbness, or the absence of any emotion, is the most frequently reported feeling. Attacks of panic, crying and headaches are common. Many widowed people report being unable to watch TV, read or even participate in a conversation because they find it difficult to concentrate.

You may be **preoccupied with thoughts and dreams of your partner.** You may find yourself searching a crowd for him or her. Others report mentally re-experiencing the circumstances and events surrounding the death. You may perform certain behaviors out of habit: setting the table as before, picking up the phone to call him or her. Fatigue is a normal response. Everything you do seems to be an effort, because grief is a heavy load.

After a time, you will become fully aware that your partner’s death is real, permanent and irreversible. Feelings and sensations are no longer dulled by shock. The key question you ponder moves from “**What happened?**” to “**Why did this happen to me?**” Anger and depression still occur. Widows particularly cope with an identity loss “**Who am I now that I am not a wife or a husband?**” This phase of grieving is the most emotionally painful because the earlier numbness no longer offers protection; feelings of helplessness occur. An overwhelming sense of loneliness is common.

During this time, **widowed people experience ups and downs.** Just when you notice progress, things go badly again. There are swings of emotion that some compare to “riding on a roller coaster.” Moving past this stage depends on your realization that holding on to the past must give way to living in the present. A different life for you is emerging.

As time passes, a widowed person begins to accept the role of an unmarried person. The thoughts and memories of one’s spouse become less constant and less painful. The question you ponder is “**Now that this has happened, what am I going to do?**” At this time, choices can be made and you can take action on things you have decided to do to meet your needs and to continue your life. Your past is placed in perspective and you are ready to create a new life for yourself. When you are determined to be a survivor, you will find yourself a participant in life.

HOW YOU CAN HELP YOURSELF

These suggestions are stepping-stones for your walk through grief:

- Learn as much as you can about the normal cycle of grief so that you will allow yourself sufficient time to let your grieving take its natural course. Insist that others allow you this time as well.
- Listen to your heart and find your own way; another person's plan may not work for you.
- Schedule a health checkup for yourself with your physician.
- Reorganize your life according to what you NOW feel is important. Examine your values and priorities and make your own decisions with confidence. (It is usually recommended that you postpone any major decisions for six to twelve months following the loss of your spouse.)
- Take care of legal and financial matters and, when necessary, revamp plans for your future.
- Work to overcome boredom and self-pity. Try to break the old 24-hour routine. Make your idle alone time an enjoyable, profitable pursuit with hobbies and interests you enjoy. Give yourself a daily goal to work toward.
- Do not isolate yourself. Talking with others is a prime outlet for grief. Reach out for a hand to hold to help you back on your feet. You may be surprised to find how many people will support you.
- Participate in life; attend a movie, have dinner out, go to a sporting event, travel, go to church, join a group or take a course at school.
- Forget about becoming your "old self" again. Confidence, hope and faith in yourself will make you capable of living normally again, but you will never be the same.
- Do not live through your children or expect your children to provide for your every need. Also, learn to accept people as they are and not as you would like them to be.
- Indulge yourself in ways that are emotionally, spiritually and physically healthy. Allow yourself little luxuries. Spoil yourself from time to time.
- Rather than yearning for the past, think ahead to the promise of the future. Your partner would have wanted you to stay active in life.
- Share your strength, faith, hope and experiences with others who are still struggling with their grief. Sharing your experiences can give strength to others.