

Mourning the Death of a Spouse

<http://www.nia.nih.gov/HealthInformation/Publications/spouse.htm>

When your spouse dies, your world changes. You are in mourning—feeling grief and sorrow at the loss. You may feel numb, shocked, and fearful. You may feel guilty for being the one who is still alive. If your spouse died in a nursing home, you may wish that you had been able to care for him or her at home. At some point, you may even feel angry at your spouse for leaving you. All these feelings are normal. There are no rules about how you should feel. There is no right or wrong way to mourn.

When you grieve, you can feel both physical and emotional pain. People who are grieving often cry easily and can have:

- trouble sleeping
- little interest in food
- problems with concentration
- a hard time making decisions

If you are grieving, in addition to dealing with feelings of loss, you may also need to put your own life back together. This can be hard work. During this time, you may be surprised by some of your feelings, but they are a part of mourning. Some people may feel better sooner than they expect. Others may take longer. As time passes, you may still miss your spouse, but for most people the intense pain will lessen. There will be good and bad days. You will know that you are feeling better when the good days begin to outnumber the bad.

For some people, mourning can go on so long that it becomes unhealthy. This can be a sign of serious depression and anxiety. If your sadness stays with you and keeps you from carrying on with your day-to-day life, talk to your doctor.

What Can You Do?

At the start of your grieving, you may find that taking care of details and keeping busy helps. For a while, family and friends may be around. But there comes a time when you will have to face your new life alone.

Here are some ideas to keep in mind:

- Take care of yourself. Grief can be hard on your health. Try to eat right, exercise, and get enough sleep. Avoid bad habits such as drinking too much alcohol or smoking that can put your health at risk. Be sure to take your medicines as your doctor ordered. Remember to see the doctor for your usual visits.
- Talk to caring friends. Let your family and friends know when you want to talk about your husband or wife. It may help to be with people who let you say what you're feeling.
- Join a grief support group. Sometimes it helps to talk to people who are also grieving. Check with hospitals, religious groups, and local government agencies to find out about support groups.
- Try not to make any major changes right away. It's a good idea to wait for a while before making big decisions like moving or changing jobs.
- See your doctor. If you're having trouble taking care of your everyday activities, like getting dressed or fixing meals, talk to your doctor.
- Don't think you have to handle your grief alone. Sometimes short-term talk therapy with a counselor can help.
- Remember your children are grieving, too. You may find that your relationship with your children has changed. It will take time for the whole family to adjust to life without your spouse.
- Remember—mourning takes time. It's common to have rollercoaster emotions for a while.

Mourning the Death of a Spouse (continued)

Do Men and Women Feel the Same Way?

Andrew, age 73, felt like the wind had been knocked out of him when his wife died. He began sleeping all day and staying up at night watching TV. Meals were mostly snacks like cookies and chips. He knew it wasn't healthy, but he didn't know what to do. Across town, Alice woke up in a panic. It had been 5 weeks since Jeff, her husband of 41 years, died. She cared for him during his long illness. How was she going to cope with the loneliness?

Men and women share many of the same feelings when their spouse dies. Both may deal with the pain of loss and both may worry about the future. But because many couples divide their household chores, there can also be differences. For example, one person may pay bills, clean house, and handle car repairs. The other person may cook meals, file income taxes, and mow the lawn. This splitting up of jobs works well until there is one person who has to do it all.

Some men are at a loss when it comes to doing household chores. But these jobs can be learned over time. Men are sometimes surprised when they're widowed. For those men who are both widowed and retired, grief may cause depression. If you or any family member is having this problem, see your doctor. Treatment can help.

Facing the future without a husband can be scary for some women. Many have never lived alone. Some women will worry about money. Women who have never paid bills or balanced a checkbook will need to learn about managing money.

Women may also worry about feeling safe. It's a good idea to make sure there are working locks on the doors and windows. If you need help, ask your family or friends. You'll need to get in the habit of taking care of your house and car. It takes time, but it can be done.

Taking Charge of Your Life

After years of being part of a couple, it can be upsetting to be alone. Many people find it helps to have things to do every day. Write down your weekly plans. You might:

- Take a walk with a friend.
- Go to the library to check out books.
- Volunteer at a local school as a tutor or playground aide.
- Join a community exercise class or a senior swim group.
- Be part of a chorus.
- Meet with old friends.
- Sign up for bingo or bridge at a nearby recreation center.
- Think about a part-time job.
- Join a bowling league or a sewing group.
- Offer to watch your grandchildren or a neighbor's child.
- Consider adopting a pet.

Some widowed people lose interest in cooking and eating. It may help to have a noon meal at a senior center, cafeteria, or with friends. When home, some people find that turning on a radio or TV during meals helps with loneliness.

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Is There More To Do?

- When you feel stronger, you may need to think about:
- Writing a new will.
- Looking into a durable power of attorney for legal matters and a power of attorney for health care in case you are unable to make your own medical decisions.
- Putting any joint assets (such as a house or car) in your name.
- Checking on your health insurance as well as your current life, car, and homeowner's insurance.
- Signing up for Medicare by your 65th birthday.
- Paying State and Federal taxes.

When you are ready, go through your husband's or wife's clothes and other personal items. It may be hard to give away these belongings. Instead of parting with everything at once, you might make three piles: one to keep, one to give away, and one "not sure." Ask your children to help. Think about setting aside items like clothing, a watch, favorite book, or picture to give to your children or grandchildren as personal reminders of your spouse.

What About Going Out?

Lillian felt lost. Widowed at age 71, she kept seeing the same couples that she and her husband, Ray, had always liked. But without Ray she felt out of place. How could she enjoy going out when she felt like a "fifth-wheel"?

Having a social life can be hard. It may be scary to think about going to parties alone. It can be hard to think about coming home alone. It may be even harder to think about dating. Some people miss the feeling of closeness and affection that marriage brings.

Here are some things to remember:

- Go slowly. There's no rush.
- It's okay to make the first move when it comes to planning things to do.
- Try group activities. Invite friends for a potluck dinner or go to a senior center.
- With married friends, think about informal outings like walks or movies rather than "couples" events that remind you of the past.
- Find an activity you like. You may have fun and meet people who like to do the same thing.
- Remember that friendship can come in many forms.

Don't Forget

Take care of yourself. Get help from your family or professionals if you need it. Be open to new experiences. Don't feel guilty if you laugh at a joke or enjoy a visit with a friend. You are adjusting to life without your spouse.