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Mourning the Death of a Spouse

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. At some point, you may even feel angry at your spouse for leaving you. All of 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

In addition to dealing with feelings of loss, you also may need to put your own life back together. This can be hard work. Some people feel better sooner than they expect. Others may take longer. Family, friends, and faith may be sources of support. Grief counseling or grief therapy also is helpful to some people.

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 you are feeling better when there are more good days than bad. Don't feel guilty if you laugh at a joke or enjoy a visit with a friend.

For some people, mourning can go on so long that it becomes unhealthy. This can be a sign of serious depression and anxiety. Talk with your doctor if sadness keeps you from carrying on with your day-to-day life. Support may be available until you can manage the grief on your own.

What Can You Do?

In the beginning, you may find that taking care of details and keeping busy helps. For a while, family and friends may be around to assist you. But, there comes a time when you will have to face the change in your life.

Here are some ideas to keep in mind:

- **Take care of yourself.** Grief can be hard on your health. Exercise regularly, eat healthy food, and get enough sleep. Bad habits, such as drinking too much alcohol or smoking, can put your health at risk.
- **Try to eat right.** Some widowed people lose interest in cooking and eating. It may help to have lunch with friends. Sometimes, eating at home alone feels too quiet. Turning on the radio or TV during meals can help. For information on nutrition and cooking for one, look for helpful books at your local library or bookstore or online.
- **Talk with caring friends.** Let family and friends know when you want to talk about your spouse. They may be grieving too and may welcome the chance to share memories. Accept their offers of help and company, when possible.
- **Join a grief support group.** Sometimes, it helps to talk with people who also are grieving. Check with hospitals, religious communities, and local agencies to find out about support groups. Choose a support group where you feel comfortable sharing your feelings and concerns. Members of support groups often have helpful ideas or know of useful resources based on their own experiences.

Online support groups make it possible to get help without leaving home.

- **Visit with members of your religious community.** Many people who are grieving find comfort in their faith. Praying, talking with others of your faith, reading religious or spiritual texts, or listening to uplifting music also may bring comfort.
- **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.** Keep up with your usual visits to your healthcare provider. If it has been awhile, schedule a physical and bring your doctor up to date on any pre-existing medical conditions. Talk about any new health issues that may be of concern. Be sure to let your healthcare provider know if you are having trouble taking care of your everyday activities, like getting dressed or fixing meals.
- **Don't be afraid to seek professional help.** Sometimes, short-term talk therapy with a counselor can help.
- **Remember that your children are grieving, too.** It will take time for the whole family to adjust to life without your spouse. You may find that your relationship with your children and their relationships with each other have

changed. Open, honest communication is important.

■ **Mourning takes time.** It's common to have rollercoaster emotions for a while.

Does Everyone Feel the Same Way?

Men and women share many of the same feelings when a spouse dies. Both may deal with the pain of loss, and both may worry about the future. But, there also can be differences.

Many married couples divide up their household tasks. One person may pay bills and handle car repairs. The other person may cook meals and mow the lawn. Splitting up jobs often works well until there is only one person who has to do it all. Learning to manage new tasks—from chores to household repairs to finances—takes time, but it can be done.

Being alone can increase concerns about safety. 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.

Facing the future without a husband or wife can be scary. Many men and women have never lived alone. Those who are both widowed and retired may feel very lonely and become depressed. Talk with your doctor about how you are feeling.

Take 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. Whether you are still working or are retired, write down your weekly plans. You might:

- Take a walk with a friend.
- Visit the library.
- Volunteer.
- Try an exercise class.
- Join a singing group.
- Join a bowling league.
- Offer to watch your grandchildren.
- Consider adopting a pet.
- Take a class at a nearby senior center, college, or recreation center.
- Stay in touch with family and friends, either in person or online.

Is There More to Do?

When you feel stronger, you should think about getting your legal and financial affairs in order. For example, you might need to:

- Write a new will and advance directive.
- Look into a durable power of attorney for legal matters and health

care, in case you are unable to make your own medical decisions in the future.

- Put joint property (such as a house or car) in your name.
- Check on changes you might need to make to your health insurance as well as your life, car, and homeowner's insurance.
- Sign up for Medicare by your 65th birthday.
- Make a list of bills you will need to pay in the next few months: for instance, State and Federal taxes and your rent or mortgage.

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 or others to help. Think about setting aside items like a special piece of clothing, watch, favorite book, or picture to give to your children or grandchildren as personal reminders of your spouse.

What about Going Out?

Having a social life on your own can be tough. It may be hard to think about going to parties or other social

events by yourself. It can be hard to think about coming home alone. You may be anxious about dating. Many people miss the feeling of closeness that marriage brings. After time, some are ready to have a social life again.

Here are some things to remember:

- Go at a comfortable pace. 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, picnics, or movies rather than couple's 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.
- You can develop meaningful relationships with friends and family members of all ages.
- Many people find that pets provide important companionship.

Take Care of Yourself

- Get help from your family, friends, or professionals if you need it.
- Be open to new experiences.
- Take time to adjust to life without your spouse.

For More Information about Mourning and Grief

Eldercare Locator

1-800-677-1116 (toll-free)

www.eldercare.gov

Geriatric Mental Health Foundation

1-703-556-9222

web@GMHFonline.org (email)

www.gmhfonline.org

National Library of Medicine

MedlinePlus: Bereavement

www.medlineplus.gov/bereavement.html

USA.gov

Search “grief” or “bereavement”

www.usa.gov

For more information on health and aging:

National Institute on Aging Information Center

P.O. Box 8057

Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057

1-800-222-2225 (toll-free)

1-800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)

niaic@nia.nih.gov (email)

www.nia.nih.gov

Visit www.nia.nih.gov/health to find more health and aging information from NIA and subscribe to email alerts. Visit <https://order.nia.nih.gov> to order free print publications.



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