

# AgePage

## Mourning the Death of a Spouse

### *Charlie and Doug's Story*

*Shortly after Charlie's husband Doug died, his friends started coming over with dinners and memories to share. They would sit around Charlie's dining table for hours remembering Doug's humor and kindness. Soon, Doug's friends were joining them with their own recollections. It was so like old times that it almost seemed Doug had just stepped out of the room. Those evenings together helped Charlie, as well as the others, start to heal after their loss.*

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.

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. You may feel guilty for laughing at a joke or enjoying a visit with a friend. It is important to understand that can be a common feeling.

### **Finding a Support System**

There are many ways to grieve and to learn to accept loss. Try not to ignore your grief. Support may be available until you can manage your grief on your own. It is especially important to get help with your loss if you feel overwhelmed or very depressed by it.

Family and compassionate friends can be a great support. They are grieving, too, and some people find that sharing memories is one way to help each other. Feel free to share stories about the one who is gone. Sometimes, people hesitate to bring up the loss or mention the dead person's name because they worry this can be hurtful. But people may find it helpful to talk directly about their loss. You are all coping with the death of someone you cared for.

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.

### **How Grief Counseling Can Help**

Sometimes people find grief counseling makes it easier to work through their sorrow. Regular talk therapy with a grief counselor or therapist can help people learn to accept a death and, in time, start a new life.

There are also support groups where grieving people help each other. These groups can be

specialized — parents who have lost children or people who have lost spouses, for example — or they can be for anyone learning to manage grief. Check with religious groups, local hospitals, nursing homes, funeral homes, or your doctor to find support groups in your area.

An essential part of hospice is providing grief counseling, called bereavement support, to the family of someone who was under their care. You can also ask hospice workers for bereavement support even if hospice was not used before the death.

Remember to take good care of yourself. You might know that grief affects how you feel emotionally, but you may not realize that it can also have physical effects. The stress of the death and your grief could even make you sick. Eat well, exercise, get enough sleep, and get back to doing things you used to enjoy, like going to the movies, walking, or reading. Accept offers of help or companionship from friends and family. It's good for you and for them.

If you have children, remember that they 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 roller coaster emotions for a while.

## Let Major Decisions Wait, If Possible.

Try to delay major life decisions until you are feeling better. You don't want to decide to make a big change, like selling your home or leaving your job, when you are grieving and perhaps not thinking clearly.

## Taking Care of Yourself While Grieving

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. When possible, accept their offers of help and company.
- **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.
- **See your doctor.** Keep up with visits to your health care provider. If it has been awhile, schedule a physical and bring your doctor up to date on any pre-existing medical conditions and any new health issues that may be of concern. Let your health care provider know if you are having trouble taking care of your everyday activities, like getting dressed or fixing meals.

## What Are the Signs of Complicated Grief?

Complicated grief is a condition that occurs in about 7% of people who have recently lost a close loved one. People with this condition may be unable to comprehend the loss, experience intense, prolonged grief, and have trouble resuming their own life. Signs of complicated grief may include overly negative emotions, dramatically restricting your life to try to avoid places you went with the deceased, and being unable to find meaning or a purpose in life.

Complicated grief can be a serious condition and those who have it may need additional help to overcome the loss. Support groups, professionals, and close loved ones can help comfort and support someone with this condition.

## Does Everyone Feel the Same Way After a Death?

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 people 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.

## Make Plans and Be Active

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

## Getting Your Legal and Financial Paperwork in Order

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 update your advance care planning.
- 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 to 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.

## Going Out After the Death of a Spouse

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 comforting 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

800-677-1116 (toll-free)  
eldercarelocator@n4a.org  
<https://eldercare.acl.gov>

### USA.gov

844-872-4681 (toll-free)  
[www.usa.gov](http://www.usa.gov)

### Well Spouse Association

800-838-0879 (toll-free)  
info@wellspouse.org  
[www.wellspouse.org](http://www.wellspouse.org)

For information on health and aging, including resources on caregiving and Alzheimer’s disease, contact:

### National Institute on Aging Information Center

800-222-2225 (toll-free)  
800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)  
niaic@nia.nih.gov  
[www.nia.nih.gov](http://www.nia.nih.gov) | [www.nia.nih.gov/espanol](http://www.nia.nih.gov/espanol)

Visit [www.nia.nih.gov/health](http://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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