

Coping with Loss

Coping with the loss of a loved one is not easy. Often it is beneficial to seek support from others who have experienced this ordeal before. You are not alone.

Living When Your Spouse Has Died

You were partners for a long time. You have shared everything. Perhaps the two of you brought children into the world. Now your partner has died and you are alone.

If your husband or wife has died, you will probably experience some of the common symptoms of grief. You will very likely go into "widow shock." You may find yourself denying at first that your spouse has died. Later, you may feel numb or like a spectator watching what's going on. This is nature's way of protecting you, of insulating you from what is happening so you can adjust.

You may also find yourself filled with anger. You may feel angry at the doctors or nurses who couldn't save your spouse, at the funeral director — even God. You may feel angry at your spouse for leaving you and then feel guilty for this anger.

In fact, you could find yourself feeling guilty for a number of reasons. It is common for the bereaved to feel guilty simply for being alive when someone else has died. You may believe you somehow should have prevented the death or been present to say good-bye. Because relationships are never perfect, you were bound to have had some disagreements with your spouse. Now you may feel guilty for those arguments, or believe you should have been a "better" husband or wife.

Husbands and wives who have lost a spouse frequently become preoccupied with the person who died. You may think about your spouse constantly, re-create the circumstances of the death over and over in your mind, have dreams or nightmares about him or her. You may even think you see or hear your spouse.

Many people are surprised and frightened by the intensity of these reactions. "Grief feels like craziness to the person who's undergoing it," explains Theresa Rando, a psychologist. Dr. Rando says it is important to realize that, bizarre as they may seem, these reactions are normal.

The mental strain of grief can take a physical toll as well. It's not unusual for the bereaved to lose weight, have difficulty sleeping, become irritable or listless, or feel short of breath. Grief has even been known to cause hair loss.

The Unique Needs of Widowers

Perhaps the saying "Women mourn – men replace" has its roots in intense loneliness caused by a lack of previously established close friendships. It has been frequently asked whether a widower would be as driven to hurriedly replace his wife, housekeeper/cook and best friend if he had someone with whom he could share his grief.

Men face unique problems as widowers. Many of their everyday needs were probably provided

by a wife. Because they are not as likely to be able to take care of themselves as widows, their health and well being can be severely affected.

Widowers may be immersed in feelings they never knew existed and may exhibit painful physical and psychological symptoms. The loss of a sexual partner may lead men to sexual fears. Because women are more frequently the primary care givers to children, men may face changes in their relationship with their children, resulting in feelings of isolation.

Because of their unique needs, widowers, particularly those who lack close friends and family with whom they can talk about their loss and grief, are urged to attend meetings and support groups or find a counselor with whom they can share their feelings.

Secondary Losses

As the reality of death sinks in, it is common for a bereaved spouse to slip into depression and to feel helpless or childlike. Dr. Rando explains that when you lose a spouse, you also experience "secondary losses" that accrue because of the death. Those secondary losses depend partly on your age. Younger couples increasingly depend on two paychecks to maintain the household. The death of one spouse can leave the other in a tight financial situation. Younger couples are also likely to have children at home and depend on each other to share the child rearing duties.

Some women are more likely to depend on their husbands to make financial decisions, get the car fixed and keep the house in good repair. Likewise, many men depend on their wives to cook, clean and otherwise manage the household.

Losing such an important companion can leave you feeling confused and panicky at any age. For this reason, you should delay, if possible, making any major decisions; try to postpone them until you can think more clearly and have a better idea of how your life is going to change.

Perhaps the most difficult secondary loss to accept is suddenly being without your primary companion. You have grown accustomed to living a certain lifestyle and engaging in favorite activities with your spouse. You have grown used to being the object of your spouse's love. For example, Dr. Rando says a woman who is widowed "didn't just lose her husband, she lost a friend, a confidant, someone with whom to take vacations."

The death of your spouse can also change the relationship you had with mutual friends. If you were used to socializing with friends as a couple, those same friends may have a difficult time interacting with you as an individual. You may begin to feel like the "fifth wheel."

Coping With Your Grief

How can you overcome the problems you face after your spouse has died? First, you must recognize that grief is necessary, and that it is something you must work through; there is no shortcut.

It is important that you give vent to your feelings. Take time to cry, and don't be afraid to share your tears with other mourners. Talk openly with family members and friends. Don't try to "protect" your children or other family members by hiding your sadness. Express your anger if

you are feeling it. This is the time to lean on your friends. They may feel awkward for awhile because they don't know how to talk to you about your loss. You can help them help you by simply telling them what you need.

If you normally have a pressing schedule, try to lighten it. Remember, grief is mentally taxing; you don't need the added strain of too much to do. Set aside some quiet times just for yourself, so you can think about your spouse's death and put things in perspective.

What if you can't seem to handle your grief? Dr. Rando emphasizes that there is no timetable for grief, so it is difficult to say when a person needs professional help. If you are worried that you are not coping well with your grief, you might consider talking to a counselor. You may be relieved to discover that you are reacting normally. If you believe you need help, ask your clergy person or doctor to suggest a counselor. Your funeral director can also offer valuable advice.

Many bereaved spouses find that adjusting to life without a partner becomes easier if they talk to others in the same situation. You might want to consider joining a local chapter of a self-help group, such as Parents Without Partners or Widow-to-Widow. Your funeral director may have information about local groups for the widowed.

Finally, remember that as time goes on, you will adjust to your new life, and your grief will diminish. This does not mean you must forget your loved one; it means you accept the death and can no longer enjoy your spouse's physical presence. But he or she will still be part of your life. Your relationship with your spouse has been changed forever, but its existence and your feelings live on forever.

Children and Death

Perhaps one of the most difficult situations parents ever face is telling their children that a loved one has died. We are afraid children won't understand death, or that they'll be crushed emotionally. Most likely, we have no idea when to tell them or what to say.

In fact, children understand more than we think. "They know about death," says Rabbi Earl Grollman, author of Talking About Death: A Dialogue between Parent and Child and several other books on death and dying. "Death education begins when a leaf falls from a tree, or when they see a dead animal in the street. Even at the age of two or three, they ask about death."

So if someone close to your child has died, you shouldn't try to avoid telling her. Children can and do handle death well — often better than the adults around them. Like adults, children need to come to terms with death and the grief that accompanies it.

Telling a Child About Death

When a death occurs, someone close to the child should tell her — preferably a parent, or a grandparent if a parent cannot. The child should be told as soon as possible. News of a death travels quickly, and parents who delay telling the children run the risk that they'll hear about it from friends. By trying to avoid hurting children, you could expose them to a bigger hurt and shock later.

Once you've told your child that someone has died, you need to explain to her what will happen next. Tell her about the wake or visitation if there will be one, and about the funeral and burial.

Of course, your child will likely have many questions. What a child will want to know depends on her age and any previous experience she's had with death. Generally, preschoolers don't understand that death is final; they may ask, "When is Grandma coming back?" After all, cartoon characters on TV are killed every week, only to return again. Children at play say, "Bang, you're dead," knowing that the "dead" person can get up and walk away any time.

Between the ages of five and ten, children come to understand that death is final — but they may believe only old people and accident victims die. If a relatively young person dies, children in this age group may demand to know why. Past the age of ten, children begin to understand that death is a part of the natural order of things, and that people die at all ages for a number of reasons.

Rabbi Grollman says that when children have questions, parents should make sure they know what the child is really asking, then answer simply and "don't over answer." If they ask, "Why did Grandpa die?" they will probably be satisfied to know that he got very sick. If they want more details, they'll ask for them.

It's also important to be honest. Don't say, "Grandpa went to sleep forever." The children may be terrified of falling asleep and never waking up. Don't say, "Grandma is in heaven, watching after you." The child may fear he or she has been burdened with an all-seeing, all-knowing spy. Don't say that "God loved your daddy so much, He called him back to heaven." Your child may be angry that God took her daddy, or fear being taken herself. Again, just try to answer all

questions as simply as possible. And don't feel that you must answer every question. If a child asks, "Why did Uncle John have a heart attack?" and you don't know, just say so.

Children should also be reassured that, although a parent has died, the other parent will still be here; that the child will still live in the same house, sleep in the same bed and go to the same school.

However, children have some naive ideas about death that you should address without being asked. Children often conclude that they somehow caused the death. They may think, "I was bad, so Mommy left," or "I wished my sister would die, and she did." Tell your child that it's not his or her fault that someone died. If a loved one — especially a brother or sister — died of a disease, reassure the child that he's healthy and won't die of the same disease.

A Child's Reactions to Death

Children are people, and in many ways they react to death like the rest of us. They may feel shock, or deny at first that a death has occurred. They may feel guilty for not being "good" to the person who died, and they may become depressed.

Children can also react to death in surprising and erratic ways. They may greet the news of a loved one's death with nothing more than a shrug, then express their grief in subtle ways later. They may regress and begin sucking their thumbs, wetting the bed, or otherwise acting like infants. They may become hostile with playmates, or they may express their grief and anger by treating their toys violently. They may imagine or pretend that they are dying.

They may exhibit curiosity about the hearse, casket, vault and grave. This is just normal curiosity. In short, there is not a "normal" or correct way for children to grieve.

Helping a Child Cope with Death

Like adults, children need to grieve, to accept that death has occurred and get on with their lives. Your child will take cues from you, so don't be afraid to express your own grief. Cry if you want to, and let your child cry with you. Don't tell your child to "be brave, don't cry." This is a sad situation, and the child needs to express his or her sadness.

Talk to your child, and encourage him to talk as well. If the child wants to talk about the deceased, allow it. Show the child that it's okay by talking about the deceased yourself. Even if your child is too young to talk about the death, you can still share your emotions. Hugging and touching will comfort young children who can sense anguish in the family, even if they don't understand what has happened. Children surrounded by sadness need to be assured that they are loved.

It's a good idea to take your child to the funeral — but don't force him if he doesn't want to go. A funeral serves a number of psychological purposes, for children as well as adults. Children, like adults, need to share their grief. The funeral provides a focus for grief, allowing people to come together and express their feelings. Funerals give meaning to the experience of death, and can be an important lesson for children.

Children must receive a careful explanation of the funeral before they decide whether or not to attend. If the decision is to attend, then the parent must provide an even more descriptive explanation of what will happen at the funeral.

If you try to protect your child by keeping him or her away from the funeral, you will likely make the child feel shut out or rejected. Children need to understand on an emotional level that death has occurred, and people who don't attend the funeral of a loved one sometimes suffer from unresolved grief later.

Remember, your child's relationship to the deceased hasn't ended — only changed. After the funeral, keep pictures and other reminders of the deceased around to spark conversations with your child. This will help form a new set of emotional bonds with the person who died.

It's very difficult to say when a child needs counseling to overcome unresolved grief. The grief process is not a series of neat, separate stages; it is more like an emotional roller-coaster ride. Feelings of depression or anger or sadness can come roaring back months after the death.

However, if a child seems beset by prolonged anger, denial, sickness or listlessness, it is a good idea to seek counseling. Ask your pediatrician or clergyman to suggest a child counselor who has experience with grief therapy. Your funeral director can also help guide you to qualified counselors. If nothing else, you and your child may discover that his reactions are normal and feel better for knowing it.