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Heart
Heart

After My Husband Died

How could I heal after such heartbreak?
Here's what we can do when our
partner of a lifetime dies

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When my husband died, a cloud of grief surrounded me. My world was an endless task of sorting and shredding yellowed papers, filling bags with once-loved items to donate, and thinking about what I'd lost.

Then one morning, as I walked into my kitchen, everything seemed transformed. The sun seemed brighter, the cabinets seemed whiter, the air seemed fresher. "Savor this season of your life," I seemed to hear God say. "New

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opportunities are all around you — don't let them slip by."

My life changed at that instant. I still missed my husband, but my life had not ended with his. Though I still loved him, I realized I could laugh and grow and enjoy

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life without him. It was time to create a new life for myself.

Those of us who have lost a spouse face a choice — to live in the past or embrace the present. Some never move beyond their grief, defining themselves as half a couple for their remaining years. Others build on the love they once had and re-create themselves as people larger than their losses.

Building a new life after a spouse's death can be slow and painful. These tips can help you heal — one day at a time.

Step 1: Getting started

Give yourself plenty of time to grieve. For some people, adjustment to the death of a spouse will be a few months; for others, years. Trust God to give you

direction at the right time.

Expect good things. It may seem like you'll never find happiness again, but think positively. You may be surprised.

It's OK to ask why.
Feelings of anger toward God or uncertainty about faith are common reactions to the death of a spouse,

but they can increase our suffering if we let them dominate us. Don't put life and faith on hold because you don't have all the answers. Be honest with God about your feelings and seek spiritual counsel while continuing to practice your faith.

Surround yourself with understanding people. Talk to friends who are good listeners and who will support your journey, even in your moments of doubt.

Steer clear of drugs and alcohol. Drugs and alcohol may temporarily dull pain, but they can lead to addiction, ill health, and further depression.

Know when depression hits hardest. Some people are at their best in the morning; others at night: Schedule your activities accord-

ingly. Do difficult tasks when you're at your strongest. When depression persists, consider spending the most painful times of the day with people who lift your spirits. You might join a support group that meets in the evening or take up an exercise routine in the morning.

Allow God's presence to comfort you. Scripture is full of prayers by people who were confused, angry, grieving, and overwhelmed. Perhaps we were given these prayers to remind us of God's understanding and love.

Reading Scripture — the Psalms, for instance — may bring you comfort.

Step 2: Accepting change

Don't expect perfection. Allow yourself time to adjust to your new mode of life. You didn't know instantly how to be a spouse; you won't know instantly how to be a widow or widower either. It's OK to make mistakes.

Take it slowly. Don't force yourself

to go back to those old familiar places or spend time with people who trigger painful memories and emotions. With time the pain can soften, and eventually these people and places may serve as comforting reminders of the love you enjoyed.

Remember, God has a purpose for you. Your life did not begin when you married your spouse, nor does it end when he or she dies. God is mindful of you and has something special for you every moment of your life.

Work toward accepting that your life has changed irrevocably.

Although it's natural to hold on to the cherished past shared with a spouse, starting to accept the present helps us tune into God's new purpose for us.

Step 3: Handling grief with your family

Be a good role model. By watching you cope with life's challenges, your children and grandchildren

Where To Get Help

No one has to grieve alone. Contact family and friends for help. Your pastor also may be a wonderful resource for answering questions and providing spiritual comfort. Your church, diocese, or community may have a grief support group you may wish to join. Some Internet sites, such as www.Griefnet.org, offer resources, online memorials, and online support groups for the grieving and those who work with them.

late spouse. One healthy and positive way to show love and appreciation for your spouse is to start a memorial fund, whether you personally underwrite or gather donations. The fund will keep your spouse's memory alive and help others in the process. You may provide scholarships, aid the homeless, promote child-abuse prevention, or support vital church ministries. Starting the fund may also be a step forward in your own life: You may find yourself engaged in meaningful work and contributing in ways you never imagined.

Step 7: Thinking about a new partner

Recognize that you don't need a romantic partner to be happy. While you may always miss your spouse, be open to living a full and meaningful life as a single person.

Take the time you need to prepare for a new romance. It's tempting to put off grieving by distracting yourself with another person. But grieving is a necessary step toward rebuilding your life. Take time to feel and express your feelings. A new romance may come along when the time is right.

Never say never. You may think

you may never love again, but you never know what wonderful person you might meet. Be open to possibilities.

Step 8: Exploring your own talents and hobbies

Follow in your late spouse's footsteps. Some people find their calling by continuing the work their spouses began.

Find your own niche. Sometimes we put dreams on hold in order to raise families or support our marriages. Now is the time to breathe new life into those dreams. Or consider something completely new.

Explore hobbies and interests.

Make a list of all the things you enjoy (e.g., gardening, rock climbing, dancing). Think about how you might make one or more of them a bigger part of your life (e.g., joining a gardening club, taking a hiking trip with friends, joining a ballroom dance team). Browse the library, magazines, and the Internet for ideas about new hobbies.

Travel. Rather than staying housebound because you've lost your traveling partner, find a friend and get back on the road. As safety permits, you may discover you prefer to travel alone, enjoying the

solitude and the flexibility of making all your own decisions.

Step 9: Embracing Gratitude

Living in regret can blind us to the many wonderful ways God is working in our lives. We may not be grateful that our spouses have passed away, but we can be grateful for how God has helped us through this difficult loss. Offer

God any regrets you may have. In doing so, you allow yourself to enjoy gratitude for the happy times and memories you shared during your marriage. **GF**

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Take a Self-Check

The following symptoms may accompany grief:

Anger	Sadness or depression	of thoughts and movements
Anxiety	Seeing images of the dead person or hearing him or her	Obsession with feelings of worthlessness or guilt
Disbelief	Sleep disturbance	Suicidal thoughts or talk
Disorganization	Suicidal thoughts	Withdrawal from all personal contact
Dizziness	Tightness in chest	
Feelings of unreality	Tiredness	
Guilt and self-blame	Weeping	
Headache	Weight loss	
Hyperventilation	Consult a doctor if these symptoms persist over a prolonged period, especially if you or someone you love experiences great difficulty eating, sleeping, and concentrating normally for more than the first month. Also seek help for the following:	
Increased heart-beat	Noticeable slowing	
Irritability		
Loss of appetite		
Loss of energy or interest		
Nausea		
Numbness		
Preoccupation with the deceased		
Restlessness, difficulty concentrating		

For more information on coping with grief and depression, contact:

National Foundation for Depressive Illness, Inc.

800-239-1265

www.depression.org

National Mental Health Association

800-969-6642

www.nmha.org

will learn that they, too, can overcome difficulties.

Keep fond memories of your spouse alive. Although your children's parent is no longer present physically, he or she still lives in memory and spirit. Recalling positive characteristics, favorite anecdotes, and family memories can help your children — and you — feel a healthy connection to your lost loved one.

Show children it's OK to be happy. Many of us feel guilty when we feel happiness after our spouses die. But joy and laughter are a healthy and necessary part of life and of healing. If your children see your happiness, they may re-embrace joy in their own hearts.

Accept support from your children. Some of the wisest truths come from the mouths of children; listen and allow them to comfort and encourage you. They may also wish to spend more time with you or be more protective than before; let them know you appreciate their care and concern.

Transform traditions.

Family traditions that bring sad thoughts may bring happiness when made new. Consider inviting new people to join the celebrations. Try new ways to carry on the traditions until they help you remember the good times. Don't be afraid to let go of a tradition that doesn't contribute to your new life.

Step 4: Making financial adjustments

Become a financial stu-

dent. Now is the time to brush up your financial knowledge. Read books, take seminars, search reliable Internet sources, and talk to friends and family.

Don't dwell on what ifs. You are now in a phase of life where you need to manage your money on your own. It's more productive to think ahead than to regret past decisions.

Think creatively. Viewing financial strains and setbacks as challenges to be overcome with creative solutions can give you a sense of accomplishment once the task is complete.

Step 5: Making a new home

Let the process of sorting your spouse's belongings help you heal. Sorting through the items your spouse left behind can be a tangible way to grieve and regroup. Letting go can be terribly painful, but as you do you make room for a positive future.

Keep only what you want. Some things you'll never want to part with because of their emotional significance, but don't keep things out of a sense of obligation. Hold a garage sale or donate to a charity.

Enjoy making your own decorating

decisions. Now is your opportunity to decorate your home exactly how you've imagined, without negotiation or compromise.

Be open to new living arrangements. Some people are comforted by the familiar; others need fresh surroundings to launch this new phase of life. You may discover your ideal new home is a cottage in the back of a friend's home, a shared apartment with a friend, or a private condo overlooking the sea. Give yourself time to decide where you want to live, and be open to new options.

Step 6: Reconnecting with others

Balance your time. Getting involved in excessive activity right away may delay the grieving process, but spending too much time alone can be lonely. Strike a balance between your need to grieve alone and your need for others' support and presence.

Recognize your unique gifts. Now that you are healing, you are equipped to help others traveling a similar path. Consider ways you might console and support others with your new strength and knowledge.

Do something that honors your

