

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. 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?

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. Try to eat right, exercise, and get enough sleep. Bad habits, such as drinking too much alcohol or smoking, 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 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.

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, there can also be differences. While married, one person may have paid bills, cleaned house, and handled car repairs. The other person may have cooked meals, filed income taxes, and mowed the lawn. Splitting up jobs works well until there is only 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. Some men who are both widowed and retired may feel very lonely and depressed. 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 how to take care of their 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. Also, 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 lunch with friends at a senior center or cafeteria. Sometimes eating at home by yourself feels too quiet. Just turning on a 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.