



## **When a Spouse Dies**

**W**hen your husband or wife dies, it's like a part of yourself dies. The sense of loss is strange, agonizing, overwhelming. After the initial shock comes a sadness that seems unbearable and an ache of loneliness that's inescapable. Speaking of the death of his wife, C. S. Lewis expressed it this way: "Her absence is like the sky, spread all over everything."



No matter what you are feeling now, or what you will feel in the days and months to come, accept these feelings. Don't deny or push your feelings away, no matter how painful or inappropriate they may seem. The only healthy way out of your grief is through it. The only feelings that will block your healing are those you refuse to acknowledge and learn from.

You are embarking on a journey that will take time and hard work. During this journey you will need to be alone with your thoughts and feelings, and you will need to reach out and share your heart and soul with others. It will not be easy or quick.

But you will survive. You will make it through. You will get better, and you will learn and heal and grow.

### **TIMES THAT ARE PARTICULARLY HARD**

After the death of a spouse, you are likely to find certain times particularly difficult: early morning, evenings, and weekends—times that you may have customarily spent with your spouse. Often it helps to change your daily routine a bit, to try reading something that inspires or diverts you, or to phone

or visit a friend or family member.

Holidays, birthdays, anniversaries and other celebrations will tend to reawaken your sorrow, possibly for years to come. On these special days, plan activities you enjoy with people who understand.

For many who have lost a spouse, bedtime is terribly hard, particularly at first. You get in the bed, but half of it is empty. There's no exchange of "good nights," or the comfort of having your companion's warm body next to you. For these and other reasons, you may find going to sleep difficult. If falling asleep is a problem, vigorous daily exercise will help you relax and will also help to ensure you are genuinely tired before going to bed. Both will assist your sleep.

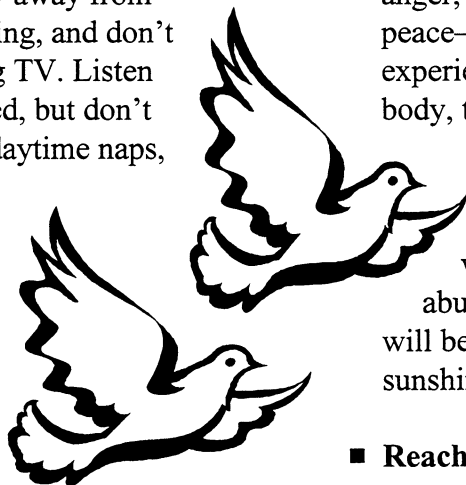
Remember, it will get better. With time the pain of missing your spouse will soften.

### **BEHAVIORS TO AVOID**

It's important that you give yourself a break, that you go easy on yourself. Nevertheless, we recommend that you stay away from certain behaviors: Avoid isolating yourself, avoid staying



too busy, and avoid using alcohol or other drugs to escape your sorrow. Also, stay away from excessive snacking or overeating, and don't spend too much time watching TV. Listen to your body and rest as needed, but don't drug yourself with extensive daytime naps, especially if you're having trouble sleeping at night. While a physician may occasionally prescribe sleeping pills for a brief period, avoid regularly using medications (prescription or over-the-counter) to help you relax or sleep.



Why avoid these behaviors? All of them have a numbing effect on your feelings. They hinder alertness and prevent you from experiencing the healing pain of your loss. As the poet Kahlil Gibran explains, "Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding."

So avoid habits that numb your ability to sense the messages of guidance that come from your body, mind and spirit. Time alone will not heal your grief. You need to surrender into the experience and learn from it.

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR YOUR JOURNEY OF HEALING**

As you walk the path of healing, here are a few pointers that can ease your way:

- **Be kind to yourself.** You've been wounded. You need to give yourself special care. Take time to rest. Do your best to eat food that comforts you and properly fuels your body. Remember to drink enough water and other fluids. And be very gentle, understanding and forgiving to yourself—just as you would to a dear friend if he or she were suffering.
- **Let yourself cry.** Sobbing promotes relaxation and the release of tension and sorrow. Tears are one of nature's ways of cleansing and healing. Crying is a gift; allow yourself to receive it.
- **Tune into what you are feeling.** Depression, anger, fear, guilt, regret, loneliness, relief, peace—whatever your feelings, let yourself experience them. Gently pay attention to your body, to your feelings as they arise in the here and now. Like different shaped clouds passing through the sky, your emotions will vary from moment to moment. For a while you are likely to experience an abundance of dark, rain-filled skies. But there will be rainbows too, and eventually days of sunshine will return.
- **Reach out to others.** Though you will need time to yourself, it's also essential that you share your thoughts and feelings. Find a few people you respect and trust, and pour out your heart. Let them hug you; hold one another's hands. Look deeply into each another's eyes. Ask for what you need: "It would help me a lot if we could have lunch together a couple of times a month." You may long for companionship with the opposite sex, and you may wonder about dating. Let that step come gradually. You'll know if and when it's the right time for you.
- **If you are a person of faith, embrace your spirituality.** Your relationship to God or a guiding power can bring immeasurable comfort in times of crisis. The shock of losing a spouse can also deepen and strengthen your spiritual life. Nourish yourself spiritually in whatever way works best for you—prayer, song, worship, meditation, or the drinking in of sacred scripture. Ask questions. Then trustfully and patiently open to the inner guidance you receive. Listen to the whispers of your heart and soul.
- **Postpone unnecessary changes.** Try to postpone unnecessary changes and big decisions. Wait a while before moving or making a major career change. First allow yourself to grieve and heal. Then you'll have a fresher perspective and more energy for getting on with your life.

- **Take time with your spouse's personal belongings.** You need not sort through your spouse's personal belongings right away. According to grief specialist Dr. Alan Wolfelt: "You, and only you, should decide what is done with your spouse's clothes and personal belongings. Don't force yourself to go through these things until you are ready to. Take your time . . . . When you have the energy to go through them, you will."
- **Accept the difficult memories.** Your spouse has died but the life you shared and the many memories are still very much alive. We come together in marriage to learn from one another. The relationship exposes our blind spots and weaknesses as well as our strengths. In the painful memories lie the seeds of healing and growth. We all have made mistakes and we all have regrets. Give your spouse *and yourself* the gift of forgiveness. As necessary, forgive again and again. Learn from the painful times, then let them go. A skilled counselor can help.
- **Cherish your fond memories.** All of the wonderful memories—enjoy them, treasure them! Let them be lifelong companions that comfort you and cheer you on.
- **Honor your spouse.** Use your creativity in discovering a way to honor your husband or wife. For example, if your husband liked Habitat for Humanity, donate money or your talents to Habitat. If your wife loved the outdoors, in remembrance of her plant a patch of beautiful flowers that will bloom year after year. And give prominence in your life to a favorite picture or keepsake that will be a frequent reminder of your spouse's special qualities.
- **Surround yourself with things that are alive.** The authors of *How to Survive the Loss of a Love* recommend that you add new life to your environment: "In addition to family and friends, invite other living things into your life—a new plant, a stray kitten, the puppy you've always wanted, some goldfish, or a fresh bowl of your favorite fruit."
- **Be adventuresome.** After you've given yourself plenty of space to grieve and heal—and only you can know how long that will take—it's time to make some fresh starts. What would you love to do? Let yourself dream; then follow your heart and take some risks. Redecorate, launch into a hobby that fascinates you, or explore new people, places and ideas.

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