

When your spouse dies

The death of a spouse can be especially devastating to older adults. Because they have been married most of their lives, and they are facing many transitions in their own lives, a death can be a real struggle. For many older adults, aging is full of many transitions. Included in the changes may be the deaths of many friends as well as a spouse.

In the beginning: turmoil

The immediate period after a loss is a time of emotional turmoil. Overcoming the trauma of death takes time, understanding, and most of all, a sympathetic ear. Anyone who grieves successfully is in turn better able to handle life's other changes. The inability to grieve and work through sadness and anger leads to bitterness and despair. Successful grieving means a spouse will not forget his or her mate but rather will be able to put life's issues into a healthy perspective.

Stages of grief vary

For healthy coping, a person must work through all the stages of grief, which can take from several months to several years. New feelings, as well as shock, depression, loneliness and confusion are to be expected. The process of grieving is natural, and it can heal, even strengthen a person.

Right after the death, relatives and friends will want to ease your pain and will likely offer to lend a hand with funeral arrangements, housecleaning and child care, for example. Accepting their help does not mean you are giving up your independence.

New challenges

Many grieving spouses develop self-confidence and pride in successfully facing challenges, ranging from fixing a leaky faucet to handling finances. Once they adjust to being alone, they can enjoy a new sense of freedom and choice. The realization that you still have the ability to live, love and learn will aid recovery from grief.

For some, a move to a new home allows them to enjoy a new beginning, or it may be a necessity. Others surviving their spouses are most comfortable in their present homes.

How to help yourself

In the journey through grief, remember these:

- **Reach out.** A grieving person who tries to cope alone often experiences inadequate grieving.
- **Expect transitions.** For grieving people, self-esteem is fragile. Expect emotional ups and downs.
- **People are different.** Everyone handles grief differently and in their own time.
- **Watch for symptoms.** Physical symptoms such as loss of appetite and sleeplessness are common during grief.
- **Stay involved.** Begin and stay involved in fulfilling activities.
- **Letting go.** The ability to let go of the past and look forward to a new life marks the beginning of recovery.
- **Express yourself.** Don't bottle up anger, sadness, guilt, relief, confusion, fear and eventual acceptance. They are all normal parts of grief.
- **Look to yourself.** Build on your past experiences of resolving loss.
- **Learn to grieve.** Grieving can promote a sense of well-being in a time of emotional distress.
- **Tell of your loss.** Mourners need to retell their experience to a listener who is supportive.

If you need help

If you find it difficult to adjust to the loss of your spouse, talk to a friend, relative or clergy. Or talk to a counselor, whose objective viewpoint can help you sort things out. To make an appointment, call (810) 257-3742. In an emergency, call (810) 257-3740 or toll free at (877) 346-3648, where a counselor is available 24 hours a day. TTY users call (810) 232-6310.

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