

Living Through Mourning

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VOLUME FOUR

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Acceptable Behavior:
"His" and "Her" Grief

Acceptable Behavior: "His" and "Her" Grief

By Scott W. Bradley, MSW, CT, CFSP

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Loss of a Spouse

The society you live in dictates acceptable behavior. For men and women, no matter how much equality is preached, expectations concerning behavior are different. In our culture, men are expected to accept difficulties with a certain amount of non emotion. On the other hand, women are expected to express themselves openly. Women are raised to see themselves as connected. They are "in relationship" to others, whereas males are taught to be independent and autonomous.

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Specialists

It is well documented that people experience emotional trauma in fairly predictable patterns regardless of gender. The difference in "his grief" and "her grief" is not due to feelings of more or less pain, but rather to the styles of coping with grief. Men have a tendency to repress anger, sadness and guilt. When men repress their feelings, they lose the opportunity to talk about the loss, open up to others, and express emotions, which are all good methods of managing grief. A recent study conducted by Ora Gilbar, Ph.D., and Anat Dagan, M.A., compared the adjustment to loss of 43 widows and 24 widowers, all former spouses of patients who died of cancer. The study wanted to see

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Loss of a Spouse

By Paivi M. Outinen, RN, LCSW

The loss of a spouse sets in motion for the surviving spouse the most stressful of life's transitions. On the Holmes-Rahe Life Stress Inventory, a spouse's death is on the top of the list as the number-one most stressful life event. The death of a close relative is number five. This ranking of a spouse's death underscores the depth and intensity of emotions that accompany widowhood. Whether the spouse's death is sudden or expected after a long illness, a plethora of feelings from loneliness and fear to anger and guilt may emerge. In the midst of the intense emotions one might even question one's sanity. Being on an emotional roller coaster makes it more challenging to adjust to changing social roles and learn to perform many new tasks. This combination of emotional and social transitions that a surviving spouse has to embark on makes widowhood such a stressful life event. We might remember a dream from childhood or from adolescence about marriage, about sharing a life with one special person. Once

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Acceptable Behavior *cont'd*

who suffered more, which would help explain data that states widows live longer than widowers. The main findings indicated that widows of patients who died of cancer suffer more than widowers. Just the opposite of what you would expect!

In summary, the study states that differences in adjustment to bereavement between the widowers and widows whose spouses have died of cancer must take into account the broader psychosocial differences between men and women.

The study stated four explanations for the findings: A widow whose husband has died of cancer is under greater stress than a widower under similar circumstances. The reason being, a wife mainly bears the burden of caregiving if the husband is dying. If the wife is dying, the husband usually receives help from family members, and is more likely to hire help, reducing his stress. Another explanation may be that the prolonged illness of the husband may cause financial problems due to his long absence from work and the cost of medical treatment.

After the death of a male spouse, the widow may also have her financial situation deteriorated due to a significant drop in income. The third reason for the findings may be loneliness, which for widows may be more intense than for widowers. Even though women are more likely to have female friends to share feelings, these relationships in the long-term tend not to compensate for the emotional void and isolation of losing a male spouse. The last explanation cited the high rate of refusal of subjects to participate in the study. Researchers are of the opinion that men who agree to participate in a study are generally those who have adjusted more successfully. This is due to the difficulty for men to express pain and suffering, which is regarded as a weakness in our society. By contrast women who agree to participate in a study are those who have adjusted less well.

The point is that men and women go about expressing their grief differently. Don't underestimate the pain of a man's grief because he doesn't show the usual signs. Accept that there may be differences in "his" and "her" grief reactions. 

Helpful Hints

Acceptance of Behavior Accept that whatever behavior someone is exhibiting is in his or her best interest. You may not like it, but try to understand how it is helpful for the other person to act in such a way. Gain a deeper understanding of the other person's actions and you may find your relationship with that person become richer and more intimate.

Talk about the Relevance Similar to acceptance, help people understand how your behavior is relevant to you even though it may irritate other people. Again, this has the potential to deepen your relationship with others as they learn more about how you want to manage your mourning.

Compare and Contrast By comparing and contrasting coping styles you will synthesize acceptance and relevance. In the midst of grieving your loss, relationships may become much stronger and mourning will become less intense and prolonged.

Loss of a Spouse *cont'd*

we find that special person, get married, and build a life together, we form a strong identity as a spouse rather than an individual. We bond as a couple emotionally, take on specific roles within the marriage, and create a social network together with our spouse. And then one day that special person died and left us alone. The joy of togetherness now turns into grief over the separation. Grief contains conflicting

feelings at times which might make a person question one's sanity or at least ask, "Am I ok?" One might experience overwhelming sadness, numbness, utter loneliness, fear, guilt, and/or anger.

Young widows in particular are physically stressed by the responsibility of raising children alone at the same time as having to take on the role of sole financial


provider. The anxiety of facing life as a single parent, the fears of being able to acquire knowledge about all household tasks and decision-making can easily turn to anger towards the deceased spouse. One might cry over the heartache of the loss and at the same time feel overwhelmed and angry for having to deal with life's demands alone.

If the spouse's death is viewed as the result of neglected health concerns or risky behavior, the surviving spouse might feel angry. Anger towards the deceased or just toward the "situation" is greater when the grieving spouse is socially isolated. Negative emotions such as anger are usually not welcomed, particularly when directed at a deceased person. Those who feel anger towards their spouse often experience guilt for having those angry feelings.



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Guilt and regret are two very difficult feelings for grieving spouses. Prolonged or complicated grief often contains guilty feelings. Surviving spouses may feel that they did not do enough to care for or to seek help for the dying spouse. Any discord in the relationship or unfulfilled promises can also lead to remorse and guilt feelings.

Each marriage is unique and each widower/widow goes through the transition from a married couple to single status in their own unique way. One's personality before the loss dictates how the person deals with grief. Some are more expressive and able to share their grief. Others are more private and choose to grieve alone. No matter how one chooses to grieve, one must do the grieving work. Having been married, having had the role of a spouse, one must thoughtfully embark on the new role as the surviving spouse, as a single person. That process can be frightening and painful, therefore most people need support in it. As the grief resolves, the surviving spouse will be able to find new goals and purpose for life. 

Some thoughts for survivors...

- Don't try to avoid or dismiss your grief. Grief after the loss of your spouse is a natural and healthy sign of your bonding.
- All feelings are fine. Pain, anger, guilt, depression, fatigue, relief, fear, confusion etc. all are normal grief experiences. If you cannot function in your daily life alone for a prolonged period of time, you might need professional help.
- Self care is very important. Adequate sleep, nutritious food (avoiding junk food and excessive alcohol), exercise, and regular health check-ups with your doctor are necessary.
- Postpone, if possible, major decisions such as selling your home or moving for the first year.
- Share your feelings with family members honestly and with children in a manner appropriate to their age.
- Create meaning in the death and find a way to memorialize your loved one. Some ways might be: donating the loved one's organs, making a memorial garden, planting a tree, or setting up a financial trust fund.
- Remind yourself that having joy again in your life does not mean that you have forgotten your spouse—quite the contrary, you are celebrating life together with the memories of him/her.

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Q&A

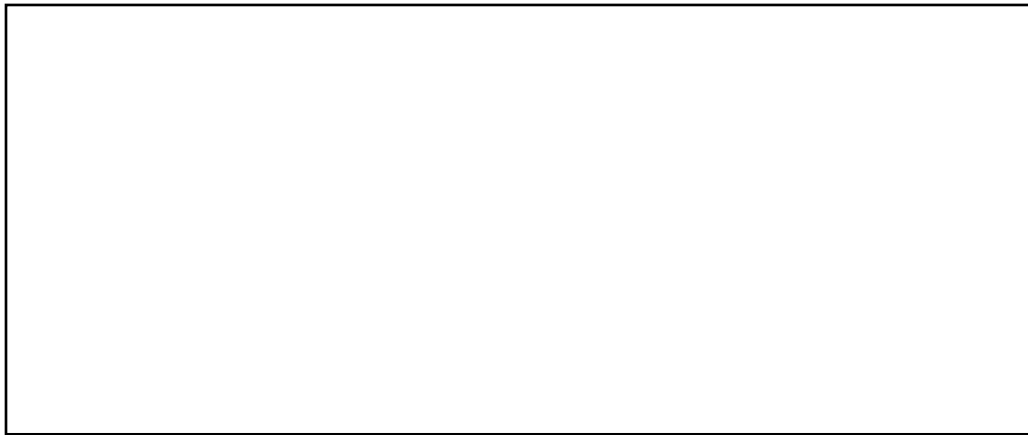
Ask Our Bereavement Specialists

My husband died six months ago and I am having a hard time focusing on all the demands of my three children who are 12, 10, and 8 years old. They are well taken care of but I have only so much energy and I seem to use it all on myself to get through the day. Am I being neglectful?

Grief work alone is exhausting without the demands of raising children. So it is expected that you feel exhausted in the end of each day. Young widows particularly have a difficult bereavement. There is so much one has to learn to manage all alone while at the same time grieving for the loss of one's spouse and the loss of all the dreams for a life together. Guilt for not doing enough for your children or being the right kind of parent is also expected. You need some time to grieve privately as well as share some of your grieving process with your children according to their age level. You might consider joining Good Grief www.good-grief.org which provides a social setting for grieving children and their family members. A bereavement group or individual counseling might also be helpful. They provide a space for sharing your thoughts and feelings as well as feedback about your bereavement journey.

It's been a little over a year since my wife died and I'm doing pretty well until the weekend comes around. I work Monday through Friday, and keep myself busy at night, but I have such a difficult time on the weekends. I know it's because this was when we spent the most time together. I miss the chores we did together, even shopping for groceries if you can imagine! How do I adjust so I don't feel so miserable on the weekends?

The weekends are usually family time. For widows and widowers the challenge then becomes about how to restructure your weekends without the old reminders and expectations of life as it used to be. Maybe you could try to get the chores done during the week and see if you can arrange social activities for your weekends. You sound like a person who is actively embracing life in spite of your loss. Talk to other widows and widowers to find out how they are coping with memories and reminders of their loved one. Life beyond bereavement requires flexibility and you seem like a person who is willing to adjust.



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