

Living through the death of your Partner or Spouse

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The death of a partner at any age is one of the most challenging of all life events. It has implications for all aspects of all our lives, physical, mental, emotional, financial and spiritual. It is influenced by many factors, e.g. the length and type of the relationship, whether the death was sudden or expected, the support available afterwards, the financial situation and, most importantly, whether, over time, the bereaved person is able to make sense of what has happened.

For many years, the emphasis in helping the bereaved was on recovery, as if bereavement was an illness. During the last two decades, the focus has shifted, and today **the need for adaptation to this life event is seen as one of the key factors in coping with the death of a partner or spouse.**

Adaptation is a process that takes time, how that time is used is very important in bereavement. The more challenging the bereavement, the greater the amount of adaptation and coping that is required. That is why, for example, the death of a partner in the first ten years of marriage can be extremely traumatic; the person's expectation of a long life shared with their partner has also been taken from them. Likewise a couple who have spent most of their adult lives married to each other may not be able to imagine living in the world without their spouse. Both of these bereavements require an enormous amount of coping, but for different reasons.

It is important to realise that the bereaved partner/spouse may experience many different emotions; from **initial numbness and shock**, even when the death was expected, to **anger and frustration** at the change that has occurred in their lives, to an often **overwhelming sadness** at the seeming unfairness of it all. Although thinking about bereavement as a series of phases may be helpful, it is important to realise that **grieving does not follow any set course.** The same feelings may recur again in the future, and **not all bereaved partners will experience the same feelings.** A useful analogy is that of a train journey where there are many stations on the journey. Whether one gets off the train at a particular station and how long one waits at that station depends on the unique circumstances of that particular traveller. **There is no right way to make this journey and no right amount of time it should take.**

The last station on the grief journey, in terms of adaptation and coping, is the most important one. This is the stop where the bereaved person is able to make sense of the death of their partner/spouse. This may be through **spiritual beliefs** (because they believe they will be reunited with their spouse in the future) or because they are able to say 'I am glad my partner is no longer suffering'; or perhaps they come to understand that the world is an unpredictable place with no guarantees about anything.

The greatest day-to-day challenge for many bereaved partners is the **loneliness** caused by the loss of an intimate relationship. Many bereaved people describe feeling as if they have lost some part of themselves. **The loss of a sexual partner can also be felt**

acutely by the bereaved partner. People may feel embarrassed or shy about having such feelings even though they are perfectly normal.

Losing a partner can feel overwhelming, particularly in the first two to three years. But remember you are already on your train journey, in the pursuit of knowledge about yourself and your place in the world.

Remember; **grief is a normal reaction to a significant loss** and about two-thirds of all grieving partners work through their grief without any outside help. **The death of a partner/spouse is not just about the loss of that person's physical presence.** It can also mean the loss of a friend, soul mate, wage earner, co-parent etc. Sometimes these losses don't become apparent for a while after the death, so it is important that you have good support in the second and third year after the death.

If you are struggling with your grief please seek support from a Counsellor or a local support group. This can be particularly useful if there was a lot of conflict in your relationship or if you were very dependent on your partner/spouse.

All relationships have their ups and downs and some people get stuck in the "if onlys" when a partner dies. **If you have feelings of guilt, check with a trusted person whether they are rational.** It is easy to feel unnecessarily guilty for things we did or said.

Being with your partner/spouse has influenced not only your life, but also the very way you are as a person. Your view of yourself and the world is intimately bound-up in the fact that you shared your life with them, and they will continue to be important in your life even after their death.

- Try to get back to a normal routine.
- Physical exercise, even a 10 minute walk can help.
- Avoid using alcohol, drugs or sleeping pills as ways of coping.
- Choose your support wisely. Don't let your bereavement experience be dictated by others. This is your grief and you know best how to express it.

Remind yourself of what this person brought to your life and find ways to have a continuing relationship with them, now that they are no longer physically present. With care, support and understanding you can learn to adapt to this loss.

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