

# When Your Spouse Dies



Can there be a deeper grief than losing the one to whom you have pledged, ‘Till death do us part?’ It is hard to imagine. Yet here it is. Your spouse has died. It is frightening, overwhelming, already lonely... You have lost a part of yourself and nothing seems to make sense anymore.

Your grief is unique. No one has had the same relationship with your spouse that you have had. The memories and experiences belong only to the two of you and now, to only you. Don’t try to grieve as you have seen others grieve. Take one-day-at-a-time. Allow your grief to work itself out in its own way. Don’t let the experience of others dictate how you heal or feel.

Talking helps. Allow yourself to talk about the circumstances of your spouse’s death. Talk about your feelings of loss and loneliness and your memories - things you did together - the good times. All of that helps. Talk about any anger you might feel or regrets or fear. Some of your listeners may try to minimize some of these, but express them anyway and understand the awkwardness others might feel. Reassure them that talking helps you.

Whatever you do, don’t ignore your grief. Shed tears if they come. Share feelings. Accept words of sympathy. Don’t be surprised, in the days ahead (weeks, months, years), if sudden bouts of grief overtake you. Someone will remind you of your spouse or you’ll see something that triggers a memory and the pain will come roaring back. These ‘grief attacks’ can be frightening because they come so unexpectedly, but they are natural. You are continuing to heal.

Find a support system. There are grief groups at every hospital or hospice. But even if you aren’t interested in being in a formal group, friends and family should be used for understanding and as sounding

boards. Allow them to walk with you in your journey through grief. And who knows, as you walk with them they may be walking with you to manage their own grief.

Not everyone has the ability to ‘understand.’ For the time being, avoid those people. You can identify them by some of their ‘advice.’ They will say things like, “Time heals all wounds,” or “You’ll get over it,” or “Keep your chin up.” While well-intentioned, you don’t have to hear those things right now. Be around people who encourage you and acknowledge your feelings of loss.

Take care of yourself. Often fatigue comes with grief. Sometimes confusion or an inability to make decisions is present. This is normal. Get some rest. It isn’t hurting anything to leave your spouse’s clothing and belongings where they are for a while. There is no immediacy required.

Treasure your memories. Pull out your photo albums and cry and laugh and remember the joy of living and doing with the one you loved. Play some favorite music, watch a favorite movie. Embrace the life you had. Even in the realization that a new life looms ahead, those memories will forever be present and will give hope for a brighter tomorrow.

If faith is a part of your life, embrace it now. Express it in whatever way seems appropriate. Be around people who share your religious beliefs and will understand your loss. Your faith can be your strongest tool for healing. Some religious people may suggest that “with faith you don’t need to grieve.” That is foolish and naïve. Faith strengthens you in your grief and promotes healing, but the work of grief must still go on. Talk to your pastor or priest or rabbi. He or she will be of great help and their prayers will help immeasurably.

Grief is a process, not an event. Be patient and tolerant with yourself. It will take time. Healing will come.

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