

THE NEWLY WIDOWED

You have lost your spouse. You have entered a period in your life no other previous experience has prepared you for. You will undergo changes – in feelings, tasks, and relationships – and will probably emerge a different person. You may become stronger, wiser, and more tolerant. But likely, you will always prefer to be your old self, with your spouse alive.

What can you expect to happen in these coming months? First, you should probably make a sign that says, “DON’T BE SURPRISED!” and situate it prominently in your home. Most of us like our lives to be predictable, stable, and controllable. These qualities are likely to be disrupted. You are probably about to be dominated by intense emotions and terrifying thoughts that will assail you without warning, and which you can’t escape. The experiences I will describe, and for which some advice will be offered have occurred to innumerable other widow and widowers, who, like you, also didn’t anticipate that status.

FEELINGS

Your feelings have probably already been somewhat baffling to you. At first, you may have been surprised to find yourself numb and in a state of disbelief. You have thought it strange that you could carry on immediately after he or she dies. For hours, days or even weeks, you have wondered when the impact of your loss would hit you.

When it hit, it hit hard, anguish and pain possessed your body. It may have come in the form of dread or panic, or instead like a knife in your gut, making your body convulse. At first, the pain seems to come from nowhere and from everywhere. As time went on, you could begin to recognize that the anguish was often triggered by thoughts, or people, or events, or objects that evoked memories of your spouse. After weeks and months they seemed to subside, overcoming you less painfully. Yet months and even years later you can expect that certain memories, smells, songs, and especially birthday and anniversaries will evoke them again.

You will begin to accept the reality of your loss and with it will find yourself living with a deep sadness. This sadness will probably be joined with a sense of loneliness and emptiness, and you may find that such feelings are most likely to dominate when you are by yourself, and undistracted by the tasks of living.

You may also feel anger – anger over his/her leaving you alone, even though he/she didn’t want to. Anger that he/she ate or drank or smoked too much. Anger at God for taking away someone who was good when such evil exists. Anger at your doctor for not being competent or caring enough to save him/her. Anger at your predicament of having to face so much with such a feeling of inadequacy.

You may experience guilt – for not pushing him/her to see the doctor sooner, for being alive when he/she is dead, for having argued and not making up before

he/she passed away. The feeling may plague you even if you understand they are irrational. If your spouse suffered through a chronic illness or intractable pain, and you experienced relief when he/she died, the guilt may hit again.

You may see couples walking on the street and experience intense envy because they are able to be together. You also may become angry at other couples for the pettiness of their arguments, such matters now that seem so trivial. You may then be ashamed about the pettiness of your own such feelings. Alas, at times you may feel apathy and despair, not caring what you feel.

As you experience these feeling, you should be aware that:

1. They are relatively universal. People who are grieving feel most of these feeling at one time or another.
2. They make sense. There is a way of understanding them.
3. Your experience is unique. Despite the predictability of such reactions, your experience is profound and uniquely yours to suffer and work through. Also, there is no requirement that you have all of these feelings, or follow any pattern.

Try not to be hard on yourself for having the feelings that you do. Don't expect to be able to control them, even though you have always prided yourself on being able to be in control. Try to understand that these are all emotions that humans can't avoid.

COPING

What can you do to cope with all these feelings? First, it is important to realize that most forms of coping come pretty naturally to people. Without even thinking about it, you will find ways to cope. You have two major tasks. One is to continue living. The second is to "recover" from the pain of your loss. The loss has created a wound that is quite painful and will take time to heal. Overexposure to the pain will wear you out and make it difficult to continue with the tasks of living. Covering over the wound completely in an effort to block out the pain will prevent it from healing. You are caught in a terrible dilemma. A part of you wants to escape from these feeling because they are torturing you. Another part may want to hold on to them even though they torture you because it seems the only way to hold on to your mate. A healthy balance will involve providing yourself with enough protection to continue to function and not be overwhelmed, and yet allow yourself sufficient exposure to these feeling so you can come to terms with your loss and its meaning.

What things do you do to protect yourself? You have found that work has been a Godsend. It keeps you busy. It makes demands, and distracts you from thoughts and feelings that would intrude when you are left alone. If you're lucky, you may have found a way of helping others in need and this may stave off some of your own needs. You may find that reading, listening to music, or watching television can also take your mind off your sorrows. You may find yourself reliving the

circumstances of your spouse's death in an effort to master it, trying to replay the scene and hoping it will turn out differently. You try to understand what happened, make some sense out of it, find some way to see some good, or experience it as inevitable. You get angry and blame others for what happened, finding anger more tolerable than pain. You make contact with people, at times desperately, hoping to distract yourself or quell the feelings of loneliness and emptiness. You pray and with your prayers feel less alone, feel cared for and protected. Sometimes you try to run from things or avoid certain people, music, clothing, pictures or memories that would bring back the dreadful waves.

Don't be hard on yourself for any of these things. Remember, you need them for your own protection.

You might have gotten the impression from family, friends, or reading that your task is to put the past behind you, or to "let go" of your spouse who has died. **DON'T BELIEVE IT.** People cannot escape the past, and you don't really want to "let go" and lose your spouse who is a part of you. Your mate will always be a part of you, and part of your task now is to find the appropriate place for him or her in your future existence.

You are probably aware of the many ways in which your spouse is still with you. You may feel his/her presence, almost sensing that you can reach out and touch him/her at times. You may speak with him/her and ask for his/her advice on matters. At times you feel that you can see him/her. Feelings about your spouse come alive when you see his/her belongings. You find yourself having thoughts or holding opinions, and are surprised to see that these weren't views that you held before your spouse died, but corresponded more to his/her views. Sometimes it is hard to get a realistic picture of the lost person and your image seems overly idealistic. You may hope that he/she appears in dreams and then are surprised when the dreams seem so mundane, a reflection of a typical experience in your lives together. It shouldn't be a surprise when you appreciate how strongly your mind and your heart wish to retrieve him/her. You aren't. At times, the capacity to recapture this sense of contact with your lost spouse may provide a tremendous comfort.

On the other hand, you may be one of those people for whom even the slightest reminder can become excruciatingly painful. Under these circumstances, you may have difficulty even recalling what he/she looked like, have no dreams, feel tremendous pressure to sell the house that holds these memories, get rid of the clothing, avoid the friends, and shut yourself off from being overwhelmed. While you may need to run, it is important to remember that at some point you will need to face the pain, or the wound won't heal. Again, it is important for you to appreciate that you are in the midst of a terrible dilemma; you may need to give yourself permission either to expose yourself to the pain or to run from it. As long as you are able to experience both sides of this struggle, you should feel free to cry or to hide as your spirit dictates.

CHANGES IN MENTAL AND BODILY FUNCTIONING

Don't be surprised if you find that you're not functioning well. You may find that your mind doesn't work as well as it did before. You may experience confusion, difficulty concentrating, an inability to sit still, read or pay attention to the tasks of your job or housework. You may find it difficult to motivate yourself to do the tasks that used come easily. You may find yourself struggling just to complete the most mundane and routine jobs. The stress of this situation can produce very dramatic and at times frightening changes. Sometimes people think they are losing their minds. This is only partially true and it is a "temporary insanity". You can't think clearly. You don't feel that you can make even the smallest decisions. You feel inept, stupid, helpless. Take heart, these are temporary experiences most often encountered in the early weeks and months of bereavement. They will pass.

Your body may be functioning badly. You are aware of how difficult it has become to sleep, to eat, to relax. You are going through a particularly vulnerable time in relation to your body and its health. The stress of your loss can be harmful to your health and it will be important for you to maintain contact with your physician throughout this period and inform him of your physical and emotional problems. Even though your many difficult and strange experiences are to be expected, your doctors' understanding and advice can be extremely helpful with many of your problems.

It is important that you be aware that physical, mental and emotional distress are not evidence that you've done something wrong, and that you are being punished. Nor are they evidence that you are weak and cannot cope. The strongest and healthiest people suffer intensely.

CHANGES IN RELATIONSHIPS

You are aware of how your social and family relationships have been changed. If you've been fortunate enough to have family and friends who can bear your pain as well as their own, you've found these relationships growing stronger and the people getting closer. However, not everyone can cope with your loss in such an ideal way. If you have small children, you may have found yourself becoming more concerned about their difficulties in dealing with their parent's death than with your own difficulties.

It is not always so obvious when people can't tolerate the pain. Sometimes you will see it when family or friends avoid you, or can't talk about what happened, or make you feel that you should already be over it when you are just starting, or get angry with you for being so needy. Sometimes, it may be too painful for you to be with family or friends because of the memories that they evoke, and you may find yourself avoiding them. Most of the time you may feel that no one understands the depth of your pain and suffering. If you're fortunate, you may find a confidante who has been widowed, or someone has referred you to meet with a group of other widowed people. In such settings you have found that you could feel safe and unembarrassed in sharing your personal experiences, since these people have gone

through the same think and can accept and support you. Perhaps your physician can help you to find such a group through a local hospital, mental health center, or religious organization.

Ironic as it seems – since you need the help and understanding – it will still be helpful for you to appreciate all of the difficulties that people have in dealing with you. Intuitively, you are aware of how much trouble people have in empathizing with you since the death is so threatening to them. As a result, you may find yourself avoiding some friends and family in order not to be a burden on them. Try not to make that judgment before you learn how much of your suffering they are willing to actually be able to handle.

“Dating “ is a difficult concept for most widowed people to deal with. You probably have already experienced the comments of some insensitive “friend” suggesting that you begin seeing other people and dating at a time when this is the furthest thing from your mind, and you have recoiled with hurt and anger. Later on, the idea of becoming involved with someone else may begin to make more sense to you. Still, if you are like most people, you may experience a troubling sense of guilt or disloyalty. You will almost surely feel anxiety about entering into a world that has been foreign to you. It can be very frightening to consider going out with a man or woman after twenty or thirty or more years of being involved with one person. You may encounter “culture shock” upon entering a social scene whose moral climate has changed so drastically since you visited before.

CHANGES IN YOURSELF

During the early week and months, your view of yourself may have been drastically altered. With all of the disruptive changes, overwhelming feelings, and inability to function, you may have started seeing yourself in a terrible light, weak, inept, hopelessly dependent, and defeated. As time has gone on, you have found yourself becoming stronger, more able to bear your loss, and more independent. It has been strange to find yourself doing things for yourself rather than for your spouse. You may not have wanted to cook a meal for one, or take the car to the service station for repair or go somewhere alone. As you have tried new things and have met with success, you have felt surprised and even proud at times. You may even develop enjoyment of this freedom and sense of self-sufficiency.

CHANGES IN OUTLOOK

For the newly bereaved, the world just isn't the same place. You may be having difficulty in understanding what the “meaning” of your life is or should be. Your beliefs have been shaken, your sense of the future either now gone or irrelevant. A hundred times a day you may be asking yourself “Why” or “How?” and occasionally, “What now?” If life still has clear meaning and direction for you, you're pretty unusual. Don't expect this state of mind to resolve quickly or easily. More important, remember, that IT WILL CHANGE. It will change after many other changes have already taken place. For many people the return of “meaning” may

not occur until you have grieved for two years. In this regard, the best advice is: "Time heals."

DECISION-MAKING

You have been and will be faced with many minor and major decisions, some far more difficult now because you alone must decide whereas two may have participated in decisions before your spouse died. Some decisions can't be put off, and you should obviously get the best advice you can from family, friends, attorney, or from services frequently available to the newly bereaved by banking institutions. However, given the emotional turmoil, mental confusion, and general disruption that has occurred, try to put off important decisions until you are clearer in your thinking, less overwhelmed by your feelings, and more sure in your decision-making capabilities. Just as important, don't let other people push you into making decisions that don't feel right to you. Make decisions when you are ready to do so and not before. Avoid impulsive decisions, especially ones that are irreversible. When you are ready, you will be perfectly capable of deciding whether or not to sell your house, get rid of your spouse's clothing, wear your wedding ring, sell the family's second car, go out on a date or put away your spouse's picture. Give yourself permission to be indecisive.

Remember, many things are happening to you, both on the outside and on the inside. Despite all of the warnings, these experiences will either creep up on you or knock you over the head. You'll never be totally prepared, and at time, you will feel overwhelmed. On the other hand, it is very likely that you will grow and become stronger from you experiences.