

Surviving the Death of a Spouse

Date updated: February 22, 2007

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Content provided by Revolution Health Group

Whether you're 28 or 82, or married for 5 years or 50, the death of a spouse is a traumatic event.

"The reality is you're never ready to say goodbye to someone," says Jack LoCicero, Ph.D., a certified grief counselor and president of the Illinois-based Association for Death Education and Counseling.

Your loss may leave you reeling under a barrage of emotions that range from anger and resentment to sadness, fear and even hopelessness. But while it may feel like you'll never recover, there is an end to grief, or at least a coming to terms with loss. To reach that point, you'll need to accomplish 5 distinct tasks, LoCicero says. Successfully moving through them will enable you to create a new life that, while different from the one you once had, is fulfilling and even joyful.

These 5 tasks are:

Task 1: Acknowledge the loss.

"It's not unusual to see a spouse after the death of a loved one who is initially functioning very well," LoCicero says. "The body really goes into automatic pilot -- and while the woman may have intellectual knowledge that her husband is dead, she does not have the emotional knowledge. It's not real yet."

It can take days, weeks or even months for that reality to set in. Until you can acknowledge your loss, you may feel emotions such as shock, disbelief, confusion and anxiety. "It's not until you fall off this little cliff into the next task that you really see the depth of despair," he says.

Task 2: Experience the pain of loss.

Following the initial shock, the reality of loss sets in and people typically experience deep pain, LoCicero says. Unfortunately, by this time the initial outpouring of support has often waned. Friends who may have told the bereaved how strong she is might not be as close at hand at this point, he adds, "because they assume she's doing so well"

Brook Noel, co-author of *I Wasn't Ready to Say Goodbye: Surviving, Coping and Healing After the Sudden Death of a Loved One* (Champion Press, 2000), calls it the 10-day syndrome. "Within the first 10 days of loss, everyone is there for you," she says. "You will have enough food to end world hunger. You will have flowers, cards, the phone ringing off the hook. And then somehow on day 11, it feels like everyone else's lives go back to normal. And you feel very, very alone."

At this point, you may feel anger, guilt, depression, lowered self-esteem, helplessness, resentment and a preoccupation with the loved one. "It can go on for months, and it's like being in a minefield -- everything

reminds you of your husband and what was lost," LoCicero says. But while it's difficult to live through, experiencing the pain is critical to working through grief.

Task 3: Readjust to the loss.

"With older widows, the most difficult task is readjusting," LoCicero says. "You're struggling with new roles and responsibilities." Instead of being a wife, you suddenly find yourself in a new, undefined role.

And adjusting to life as a newly single person can be a challenge at any age, Noel says. "It's a completely different identity. So they have a long process of rebuilding their life as a widow."

Women may face a double whammy as their circle of friends is redefined. "We have to reformulate who we are, and then we often find that our friendships change," she says. Especially for an older woman, she may lose the social relationships that she had with other couples before her spouse died. "A lot of time, other couples have a difficult time relating to you. It's a reminder to them of what can happen."

The bereaved likely will also still feel a strong yearning for her loved one, LoCicero says. "You're looking for them where ever you are. You may be sure you see him at the mall or walking into the Sears store," he adds. "When you're yearning to have someone back in your life, you find them every where."

Task 4: Reinvest emotional energy

Although you'll likely still experience moments of pain and will always feel a loss, working through tasks two and three have allowed you to move on to reinvesting your emotional energy, a task that leads to "a sense of healing, developing new environments, relationships and activities," LoCicero says. "It is a huge turning point in their grief."

And it's a critical step. Without the ability to reinvest in new relationships and activities, "it's not unusual to find a woman who is just waiting to die," he says. "That's a woman who has not been able to master the fourth task."

Task 5: Reconcile the loss

With the most painful part of grieving behind you, you're finally ready to reconcile your loss, heading in a new direction in life and remembering your loved one with less pain, LoCicero says. "Life will be different, but it can be good again," he says.

Here are some other tips on healing from LoCicero and Noel.

- Expect to feel a flood of emotions. "One of the things I hear again and again is they feel like they are going crazy," Noel says about the bereaved. "They are disorganized, their emotions are intense and they think that they are literally losing their mind — but it's all part of the initial grieving process." Of course, if you feel that you need professional help or if you feel an inclination to harm yourself or others, you should seek help immediately.

- Get practical help. To help you through the early days when you may still be in shock, Noel says: "Find someone that you trust. You need to have somebody who knows you well to act as your brains because you are not thinking as you normally would."
- Get support. "I recommend strongly that widowed women join groups with other widowed women and just talk and share," says LoCicero, who adds that this may be harder for older women who need help to get to group meetings.
- Don't allow yourself to be isolated. The mourning process typically involves a wake, funeral, and phone calls and letters, and maybe even visits to offer condolences. After that initial outpouring, many women are on their own, which means they'll need to find other ways to get support. "Make sure that you're getting out and establishing relationships that are healthy," says Noel, who points out that older women may need help in doing so. "You need to have interaction."
- Give yourself time. It typically takes 1 to 5 years to go through all 5 tasks — and even longer if the spouse's death was unexpected or traumatic, LoCicero says.
- Honor your feelings, mentally and physically. Especially early on in your bereavement, "a lot of people think they should grieve this way or they should resume a particular activity at a certain time," Noel says. "It's unique to each individual. Put aside your expectations of what you think grief should look like and follow your feelings."
- Allow yourself to feel happy. "A lot of times women have a hard time experiencing joy," Noel says. "So, they go a month and then go out with a girlfriend. And the girlfriend says something that makes them laugh, and there can be a sudden sense of guilt." Instead of feeling guilty, "realize that your happiness is good; your loved one would have wanted you to feel happy."
- Have personal grief sessions. Noel says to set aside 20 to 60 minutes a day "to make sure you really feel and honor your grief -- so you don't fall into the habit of hiding it." Your grief session may involve writing in a journal, talking to a friend or just taking a walk alone to think about your spouse.
- Honor your spouse's memory. "With many people, there is a fear that they are going to somehow forget the person they've lost," Noel says. "What can happen is they stop the grieving process and live in the past. They become scared to move on and start a new life." Instead, "learn how to incorporate the memory of the person into your life," she says. One example: if your spouse favored a certain charity or cause, you might continue his work to benefit the cause.

Keep in mind that grieving varies greatly by person and that you'll likely face ups and downs in the process. "It's never neat and tidy, and it shouldn't be," Noel says. "It's one of the most challenging things a person will ever face in their lives."