

A Guide for the Newly Widowed

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Losing a loved one — whether through unexpected or anticipated circumstances — is always traumatic. This is especially true with the death of a spouse. It is one of life's most profound losses. The transition from wife to widow, husband to widower, is a very real, painful, and personal phenomenon. The trauma of trying to adjust to this new identity while being besieged with a multitude of urgent questions and decisions can be overwhelming.

Here are several things to remember when faced with the death of your spouse. While they may seem simple, they are very important points to remember:

Give yourself permission to mourn. Men and women both need to give themselves permission to mourn. Postponing a confrontation with your feelings by filling each day with frantic activity will only delay and compound the grief reaction. Denying your grief can be helpful in separating yourself from the pain. But, the agony is still there and it will stay there until you acknowledge it.

Be aware that you may experience a range of emotions. Your reactions to death may cover a wide and confusing range of emotions (such as shock, numbness, anger, pain, and yearning). It may help to think of grief as clusters of reactions or fluid phases that overlap one another. Grief does not proceed in an orderly fashion any more than life itself does.

With effort, you can and you must overcome your grief. One of the myths about mourning is that it has an ending point, that if you just wait long enough, it suddenly stops hurting. It doesn't. It requires work. More than time, bereavement takes effort to heal. Mourning is a natural and personal process that only you can pace. It cannot be rushed and it cannot happen without your participation.

When needed, find the strength to take action. As a newly widowed person, there may be urgent financial and legal decisions you must make following the death of your spouse. You have just suffered an emotionally devastating event and the last thing you want to deal with is money matters. But money does matter, now and for your future, so try to do the best you can. Postpone, however, any decisions that can be put off until you feel better emotionally.

Work to tame your fears. When the first impact of death wears off, you may feel you are losing control. This is a normal part of the grieving process. Unlike mental illness, the strong feelings suffered during grief gradually and permanently disappear. Because you may experience a feeling of temporary instability, it's important to remember that you have the ability to cope. This is a time when much of your adjustment to widowhood takes place.

In your own time, in your own way, you can say goodbye. The present, with all its pain and sorrow, is the only reality you have. Memories are very important, but they

cannot be used as a shield against the present. At some point in your grieving, you will be ready to try to say goodbye.

Stress can wreak havoc on your health. The effect of grief on our health is just beginning to be measured. While guarding your health can be among the least of your concerns during the throes of grief, you must work toward maintaining your health as soon as you feel able. This means beginning some form of regular exercise, getting proper nutrition, and reporting physical complaints to your doctor.

If interested, consider employment, continuing education or volunteer opportunities that match your needs and interests. Entering the job market after a long absence, or for the first time, can be one of the most challenging tasks that widowed persons encounter. If interested, look for ways to enhance, capitalize and build on the skills you've developed over the years. Don't be afraid to ask about employment opportunities whenever and wherever you can. Prepare well for your job search. If you do not need to return to work immediately, you may decide to go back to school or to contact Elderhostel, which offers educational opportunities in the U.S. and abroad. There are also volunteer opportunities that are meaningful and personally fulfilling in your community, which you may want to consider.