

On Being Alone



Guide For Widowed Persons



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On Being Alone: A Guide for the Newly Widowed

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:

1. Give yourself the time 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 pain. But, the agony is still there and it will stay there until you acknowledge it.

2. 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.

3. 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 neutral and personal process that only you can pace. It cannot be rushed and it cannot happen without your participation.

4. 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.

5. 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.

6. 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.

7. 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.

8. 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 enhance, capitalize and build on 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.



Tear Soup Cooking Tips

Reprinted from
TearSoup, a recipe for healing after loss

If **you** are the cook:

- This is your grief- no one else's. Your friends can't feel your loss in the same way. It will not affect their life the way it affects yours. And you may resent them for that.
 - At first you may think dying would be preferable to having to go through this pain. Just try to stay alive. Sudden mood swings are normal. You may suddenly be unreasonable not short.
 - Try your best to educate your friends about what you need and how they can help. Be as honest as you can be about how you are feeling.
 - Don't give up on your friends if they let you down. But if they continue to be insensitive to your grief you may need to distance yourself for a while until you get stronger.
 - At first you will probably want to talk to as many people as possible, but after a month or so, find one or two people whom you can count on for the long haul to just be there and listen when you need to talk.
 - Write your thoughts in a journal. It will help you to process and also to remember the new insights you are learning.
 - Consider attending a support group. Go at least three times before deciding if it is helpful to you.
 - Be open to counseling.
 - Exercise, sleep, drink plenty of fluids, and eat a well-balanced diet.
 - Pamper yourself. Take bubble baths. Get a massage.
 - Try not to compare your grief with another's. You don't earn points for having a more painful experience than someone else has. And you won't feel less grief if someone else's loss is worse.
 - You deserve to feel happy again. Being happy doesn't mean you forget. Learn to be grateful for the good days.
 - Don't be too hard on yourself.
 - Long after everyone else has forgotten your loss, you will continue to remember.
 - Learn to be content with your private memories.
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If **your child** is the cook

- Be honest with the child and give simple, clear explanations consistent with the child's level of understanding. Be careful not to overload them with too many facts. This information may need to be repeated many times.
 - Prepare the child for what they can expect in a new situation such as, going to a memorial service, or viewing the body. Explain as best as you can how others may be reacting and how you would like the child to behave.
 - When considering if a child should attend a memorial service consult the child. Their wishes should be the main factor for the decision. Include the child in gatherings at whatever level they want to participate. Helping to make cookies for the reception may be all they want to do.
 - Expect them to ask questions like, "Why does he have his glasses on if he's dead and can't read?" Or, "Why is her skin cold?"
 - Younger children are more affected by disruptions in their environment than by the loss itself.
 - Avoid confusing explanations of death, such as, "gone away", or "gone to sleep." It might be better to say, "his body stopped working."
 - Avoid making God responsible for the death. Instead say, "God didn't take your sister, but God welcomed her." Or, "God is sad that we're sad. But now that your sister has died, she is with God."
 - Don't assume that if the child isn't talking about the loss it hasn't affected them.
 - Be consistent and maintain the usual routines as much as possible.
 - Encourage the child to express their feelings and to ask questions.
 - Children may act out their grief in their fantasy play and artwork.
 - If children have seen adults cry in the past they will be less concerned about tears now.
 - Show affection and let them know that they are loved and will be taken care of.
 - Each child reacts differently to loss. Behaviors that you may observe include: withdrawal, acting out, disturbances in sleeping and eating, poor concentration, being overly clingy, regression to earlier stages of development, taken on attributes of the deceased.
 - Sharing your grief with a child is a way to help them learn about grief.
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Grandy's Cooking Tips

- Grief is the process you go through as you adjust to the loss of anything or anyone important in your life.
 - The loss of a job, a move, divorce, death of someone you love, or a change in health status are just a few of the situations that can cause grief.
 - Grief is both physically and emotionally exhausting. It is also irrational and unpredictable and can shake your very foundation.
 - The amount of "work" your grief requires will depend on your life experiences, the type of loss, and whatever else you have on your plate at that time.
 - A sudden, unexpected loss is usually more traumatic, more disruptive and requires more time to adjust to.
 - If your loss occurred through violence, expect that all the normal grief reactions will be exaggerated.
 - You may lose trust in your own ability to make decisions and /or to trust others.
 - Assumptions about fairness, life order, and religious beliefs are often challenged.
 - Smells can bring back memories of a loss and a fresh wave of grief.
 - Seasons, with their colors and climate, can also take you back to that moment in time when your world stood still.
 - You may sense you have no control in your life.
 - Being at work may provide a relief from your grief, but as soon as you get in the car and start driving home you may find your grief come flooding back.
 - You may find that you are incapable of functioning in the work environment for a short while.
 - Because grief is distracting it also means you are more accident-prone.
 - The object of grieving is not to get over the loss or recover from the loss but get through the loss.
 - Over the years you will look back and discover that this grief keeps teaching you new things about life. Your understanding of life will just keep going deeper.
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Some quotes:

“There is in every one of us an inward sea. In that sea there is an island; and on that island there is a temple. In that temple there is an altar; and on that altar burns a flame. Each one of us, whether we bow our knee at an altar external to ourselves or not, is committed to the journey that will lead him to the exploration of his inward sea, to locate his inward island, to find the temple, and to meet, at the altar in that temple, the God of his life. Before that altar, impurities of life are burned away; before that altar, all the deepest intent of your spirit stands naked and revealed; before that altar, you hear the voice of God, giving lift to your spirit, forgiveness for your sins, renewal for your commitment. As you leave that altar within your temple, on your island, in your inward sea, all the world becomes different and you know that, whatever awaits you, nothing that life can do will destroy you.”

by Howard Thurman

“Every human being has a great, yet often unknown, gift to care, to be compassionate, to become present to the other, to listen, to hear and to receive. If that gift would be set free and made available, miracles could take place.”

by Henri J. M. Nouwen

A prayer

“My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going, I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end, nor do I really know myself. And the fact that I think that I am following you does not mean that I am actually doing so but I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”

by Thomas Merten

“Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things... and the God of peace will be with you.”

Phillipians 4:8



Widows and Widowers

This is the one class of mourner given a specific title. “Widow” comes from the Latin *videre*, “to separate,” and the Sanskrit *vindhate*, “he lacks.” The loss of a lover and life companion alters a hundred details of daily existence and communication; it also obliges the widowed to commence the task of recovering an identity separate from the one to whom they have surrendered a part of themselves. In the next selections, the poems isolate specific feelings of sadness and loneliness; the journals and memoirs describe the process of the journey to a new self.

Li Ch’ing Chao - P’u-Shen Sheng Man

Li Ch’ing Chao is known as China’s greatest female poet.
This poem is translated from the Chinese by Duncan Mackintosh

Unending search in endless quest
So cold and still, how cold and still;
By grief and anguish, grief and anguish hard oppressed.
This season of the sudden change from warm to chill
Weights down the heart in search of peace.
Cupfuls of light wine, two or three;
How else confront the wind that blows at dusk so urgently?
Even the flighting geese
Have stabbed me to the heart,
Friends that fly past me out of older memories.
Chrysanthemums in yellow masses everywhere:
Melancholy has marked them for its own.
From whom are they worth gathering growing there?
Watching from my window all alone
How am I to live until the darkness falls?
Fine rain is falling, too, into the dusk’s uncertainties.
Tell me, with this, then, with all this,
How can the one word “sorrow” paint what sorrow is?



C.S. Lewis – from A Grief Observed

Lewis originally published this private journal under the pseudonym N.W. Clerk, a pun on Old English for “I know not what scholar.”

No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning. I keep on swallowing.

At other times it feels like being mildly drunk, or concussed. There is a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me. I find it hard to take in what anyone says. Or perhaps, hard to want to take it in. It is so uninteresting. Yet I want the others to be about me. I dread the moments when the house is empty. If only they would talk to one another and not to me.

There are moments, most unexpectedly, when something inside me tries to assure me that I don't really mind so much, not so very much, after all. Love is not the whole of a man's life. I was happy before I ever met H. I've plenty of what are called “resources.” People get over these things. Come, I shan't do so badly. One is ashamed to listen to this voice but it seems for a little to be making out a good case. Then comes a sudden jab of red-hot memory and all this “commonsense” vanishes like an ant in the mouth of a furnace...

And no one ever told me about the laziness of grief. Except at my job – where the machine seems to run much as usual – I loathe the slightest effort. Not only writing but even reading a letter is too much. Even shaving. What does it matter now whether my cheek is rough or smooth? They say an unhappy man wants distractions – something to take him out of himself. Only as a dog-tired man wants an extra blanket on a cold night; he'd rather lie there shivering than get up and find one. It's easy to see why the lonely become untidy; finally, dirty and disgusting ...

I cannot talk to the children about her. The moment I try, there appears on their faces neither grief, nor love, nor fear, nor pity, but the most fatal of all non-conductors, embarrassment. They look as if I were committing an indecency. They are longing for me to stop. I felt just the same after my own mother's death when my father mentioned her. I can't blame them. It's the way boys are...

It isn't only the boys either. An odd by-product of my loss is that I'm aware of being an embarrassment to everyone I meet. At work, at the club, in the street, I see people, as they approach me, trying to make up their minds whether they'll “say something about it” or not. I hate it if they do, and if they don't. Some funk it altogether. R. has been avoiding me for a week. I like best the well brought-up young men, almost boys, who walk up to me as if I were a dentist, turn very red, get it over, and then edge away to the bar as quickly as they decently can. Perhaps the bereaved ought to be isolated in special settlements like lepers. ...



... There is one place where her absence comes locally home to me, and it is a place I can't avoid. I mean my own body. It had such a different importance while it was the body of H's lover. Now it's like an empty house. But don't let me deceive myself. This body would become important to me again, and pretty quickly, if I thought there was anything wrong with it...

It is hard to have patience with people who say "There is no death" or "Death doesn't matter." There is death. And whatever matters. And whatever happens has consequences, and it and they are irrevocable and irreversible. You might as well say that birth doesn't matter. I look up at the night sky. Is anything more certain that in all those vast times and spaces, if I were allowed to search them, I should nowhere find her face, her voice, her touch? She died. She is dead. Is the word so difficult to learn? ...

Talk to me about the truth of religion and I'll listen gladly. Talk to me about the duty of religion and I'll listen submissively. But don't come talking to me about the consolations of religion or I shall suspect that you don't understand.

... Aren't all these notes the senseless writings of a man who won't accept the fact that there is nothing we can do with suffering except to suffer it? Who still thinks there is some device (if only he could find it) which will make pain not to be pain. It doesn't really matter whether you grip the arms of the dentist's chair or let your hands lie in your lap. the drill drills on. ...

It's not true that I'm always thinking of H. Work and conversation make that impossible. But the times when I'm not are perhaps the worst. For then, though I have forgotten the reason, there is spread over everything a vague sense of wrongness, of something amiss. Like in those dreams where nothing terrible occurs- nothing that would sound even remarkable if you told it at breakfast-time – but the atmosphere, the taste of the whole thing is deadly. So with this. I see the rowan berries reddening and don't know for a moment why they; of all things, should be depressing. I hear a clock strike and some quality it always had before has gone out of the sound. What's wrong with the world to make it so flat, shabby, worn-out looking? Then I remember.

What sort of lover am I to think so much about my affliction and so much less about hers? Even the insane call, "Come back," is all for my own sake. I never even raised the question whether such a return, if it were possible, would be good for her. I want her back as an ingredient in the restoration of my past. Could I have wished her anything worse? Having got once through death, to come back and then, at some later date, have all her dying to do over again. They call Stephen the first martyr. Hadn't Lazarus the rawer deal? ...

Something quite unexpected has happened. It came this morning early. For various reasons, not in themselves all mysterious, my heart was lighter than it had been for many weeks. For one thing, I suppose I am recovering physically from a good deal of mere exhaustion. And I'd had a very tiring but very healthy twelve hours the day before, and a sounder night's sleep; and after ten days of low-hung grey skies and motionless warm dampness, the sun was shining and there was a light breeze. And suddenly at the very moment when, so far, I mourned H. least, I remembered her best. Indeed it was something (almost) better than memory; an



instantaneous, unanswerable impression. To say it was like a meeting would be going too far. Yet there was that in it which tempts one to use those words. It was as if the lifting of sorrow removed a barrier.

Why has no one told me these things? How easily I might have misjudged another man in the same situation? I might have said, "He's got over it. He's forgotten his wife," when the truth was, "He remembers her better *because* he has partly got over it."

... There's no denying that in some sense I "feel better," and with that comes at once a sort of shame, and a feeling that one is under a sort of obligation to cherish and foment and prolong is one's unhappiness. I've read about that in books, but I never dreamed I should feel it myself. I am sure. H. wouldn't approve of it. She'd tell me not to be a fool. ...

This is the fourth – and the last – empty MS. book I can find in the house; at least nearly empty, for there are some pages of very ancient arithmetic at the end by J. I resolve to let this limit my jottings. I will not start buying books for this purpose. In so far as this record was a defence against total collapse, a safety-valve, it has done some good. The other end I had in view turns out to have been based on a misunderstanding. I thought I could describe a state; make a map of sorrow. Sorrow, however, turns out to be not a stat but a process. It needs not a map but a history, and if I don't stop writing that history at some quite arbitrary point; there's no reason why I should ever stop. There is something new to be chronicled every day. Grief is like a long valley, a winding valley where any bend may reveal a totally new landscape. As I've already noted, not every bend dies. Sometimes the surprise is the opposite one; you are presented with exactly the same sort of country you thought you had left behind miles ago. That is when you wonder whether the valley isn't a circular trench. But it isn't. There are partial recurrences, but the sequence doesn't repeat.

Here, for instance, is a new phase, a new loss. I do all the walking I can, for I'd be a fool to go to bed not tired. Today I have been revisiting old haunts, taking in one of the long rambles that made me happy in my bachelor days. And this time the face of nature was not emptied of its beauty and the world didn't look (as I complained some days ago) like a mean street. On the contrary, every horizon, every stile or clump of trees, summoned me into a past kind of happiness, my pre-H. happiness. But the invitation seemed to me horrible. The happiness into which it invited me was insipid. I find that I don't want to go back again and be happy in that way. It frightens me to think that a mere going back should even be possible. For this fate would seem to me the worst of all; to reach a state in which my years of love and marriage should appear in retrospect a charming episode – like a holiday – that had briefly interrupted my interminable life and returned me to normal, unchanged. And then it would come to seem unreal – something so foreign to the usual texture of my history that I could almost believe it had happened to someone else. Thus H. would die to me a second time; a worse bereavement than the first. Anything but that. ...

It is often thought that the dead see us. And we assume whether reasonably or not, that if they see us at all they see us more clearly than before. Does H. now see exactly how much forth or tinsel there was in what she called, and I call, my love? So be it. Look your hardest, dear. I wouldn't hide it if I could. We didn't idealize each other. We tried to keep no secrets. You knew



most of the rotten places in me already. If you now see anything worse, I can take it. So can you. Rebuke, explain, mock, forgive. For this is one of the miracles of love; it gives – to both, but perhaps especially to the woman – a power of seeing through its own enchantments and yet not being disenchanted. ...

I said, several notebooks ago, that even if I got what seemed like an assurance of H.'s presence. I wouldn't believe it. Easier said than done. Even now, though, I won't treat anything of that sort as evidence. It's the quality of last night's experience – not what it proves but what it was – that makes it worth putting down. It was quite incredibly unemotional. Just the impression of her mind momentarily facing my own. Mind, not "soul" as we tend to think of soul. Certainly the reverse of what we call "soulful." Not at all like a rapturous re-union of lovers. Much more like getting a telephone call or a wire from her about some practical arrangement. Not that there was any "massage" – just intelligence and attention. No sense of joy or sorrow. Now love, even in our ordinary sense. No un-love. I had never in any mood imagined the dead as being so – well, so business-like. Yet there was an extreme and cheerful intimacy. An intimacy that had not passed through the senses or the emotions at all.

P'An Yueh (P'An Yeng Jen)

Fourth Century A.D.

In Mourning for His Dead Wife

Winter and Spring even come and gone.
Once more Autumn overtakes Summer.
She has returned to the Hidden Springs.
And all the world separates us forever.
Who will listen to my secrets now?
Who will I live for now?
I try to do my job at Court,
and reluctantly go through the motions of duty,
and take up the tasks I had dropped.
When I come home I can think only of he.
When I come in our room I expect to see her.
I catch her shadow on the screens and curtains.
Her letters are the most precious examples of calligraphy.
Her perfume still haunts the bedroom.
Her clothes still hang there in the closet.
She is always alive in my dreams.
I wake with a start.

