



WinterSpring

Facing Loss, Embracing Life Again -- Together

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Grieving the Death of a Spouse or Partner

Note: For ease of reading, "spouse," "life partner," and "partner" are used interchangeably throughout this handout.

As with other deaths of someone we love deeply, grieving the loss of a spouse or life partner shares much in common with other grief and has its own unique qualities and challenges. For many, a spouse is interwoven more closely into their daily lives and sense of identity than other close loved ones and family members. Especially after kids are no longer living at home, a spouse is the one who is still there, still the one you start and end your days with. You may have left your parents' home when you were a young adult, and your kids may do likewise, so if you are in a long term relationship your partner will likely be the only one you'll still be sharing daily meals with after twenty, thirty, forty years or more. That's a unique relationship!

Even if you're grieving the loss of a partner with whom you shared far fewer years, the nature of a marriage or marriage-like relationship carries its very own imprint of intimacy, and of sharing the day-to-day ups and downs of life together as a "we" rather than just a "me." For many, losing the "we" and being faced with the transition back to a "me" can be a shocking part of spouse-loss grief. We expect to miss the person, of course, to miss being with them and sharing the stories, the laughs, the mishaps, the heartbreaks, and all the little day-to-day details and decisions. What takes many by surprise is the kind of deep identity crisis that can happen when one's "other half" is no longer there. Unsettling questions can start to arise and become very real: *Who am I now? What do I want for my own life, now that it's not our life that we, together, are planning and shaping?*

Life partners tend to play so many different roles with and for each other, often complementing each other's skills and preferences. So when one is suddenly gone (and the "gone" often feels sudden, even if there was a long illness preceding the death) the other is left with all kinds of tasks and functions they may not have been doing for many years. As Jane E. Brody writes in a *New York Times* online article from 2010:

When asked how I'm doing since my husband died in March, I often respond that I need a 48-hour day. It's a challenge to be Richard and Jane and still do my work and enjoy my life. I have yet to balance the checkbook, there are piles upon piles of unprocessed paperwork everywhere...

And Michael, a grieving widower, writes on griefjourney.com about both the "empty house" syndrome so many widows and widowers face, but also the loss of one of the roles his wife used to play in his life:

I would go to work and it would seem that everything was the same... But then I would come home. WOW! Just walking into that empty house. Nobody to say hello or ask me how I got on that day. No delicious aroma of supper in the oven. I had to make my own meal...when I felt like it...and most of the time I didn't...

Even before dating again becomes a question, being social as a single person rather than as part of a couple can be awkward and painful too. For many couples, one person is the more social and outgoing and the other more quiet or introverted. Especially when the more social one has died, the other one can feel isolated and lack confidence in making social arrangements or engaging with others in social settings.

And that's just the beginning of the roles and functions one partner in the relationship may have played. Others include:

- The Caregiver
- The Cook
- The Reminder-Giver or Schedule-Keeper
- The Confidante & Best Friend
- The One to Bounce Ideas Off Of
- The Rock
- The Finance Person
- The Maintenance & Repairs Manager
- The Lover
- The One Who Did Research
- The Home Decorator
- The "I've Got Your Back" and "I'm in Your Corner" Support Person

When a partner in the constellation of "Us" dies, the griever is left to mourn the death not only of his or her beloved and that beloved's presence, but also the loss of each function the beloved served. It can feel like loss within loss within loss, a compound grief. "I miss my spouse" is really a kind of shorthand for the loss of each of these roles and relationships within the marriage. All are grieved.

Another piece, especially for couples who've been together a long time, is grieving the future life that had been planned and worked for together. The retirement that would have been shared, the kids (or grandkids) that would have been a mutual joy, that trip to Spain that was finally going to happen... and on it goes.

And now, in the age of social media, the question of how one presents oneself to the world can feel more complicated. As a grieving husband writes on www.soaringspirits.org, a website for widows and widowers: "God forbid I change my 'relationship status' on facebook, because that wipes out 10 years of marriage."

Social media can also come into play both in terms of bridging the sense of isolation that any kind of deep grieving can bring, and providing a stark reminder of it. An illustration of this from another grieving husband, a few days after the first anniversary of his wife's death (also from www.soaringspirits.org):

As far as the internet is concerned, life moves on until the next year, when suddenly it seems like everyone is thinking about her again. I don't have that option. I think about Megan...every...single...day.

Many long-term partners of people who've died from an illness have served as caregivers for months, or even years, before the death. A history of intensive caregiving, especially over a long period of time, is another way grief can be greatly magnified. There is often already a sense of lack of one's personal compass, or central reference point, after the death of a life partner. Add to that the fact that full-time caregivers tend to need to give up almost all other activities in their lives and then revolve their daily schedules around the needs of their ailing partner. After the death their grief is often intertwined with a profound sense of emptiness and lack of purpose. There is no job or all-consuming interest close at hand anymore to temporarily lose themselves in. Their entire daily schedule might no longer apply, and time itself can seem distressingly open-ended, without direction or meaning.

As with other forms of profound grief, it can be extremely helpful to join a bereavement support group. And reading about other people's experiences after the death of a life partner can be helpful. If you're inclined to go online, there are high-quality websites focused on grief and more specifically, spouse and partner loss. Check out <http://winterspring.org/spouse-partner-loss/> for a list of resources.