



SPOUSAL GRIEF

Coping with the death of a life partner



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SERVICES®

SPOUSAL GRIEF: COPING WITH THE DEATH OF A LIFE PARTNER

It is difficult to imagine the magnitude of pain associated with the traumatic death of a loved one, especially when the loved one is your spouse or life partner.

When a spouse or life partner is killed suddenly and violently, you may feel angrier than you have ever felt and sadder than you thought possible. You may have scary thoughts and you may do strange things. You may be afraid you are “going crazy.” Grieving the death of your loved one can feel so overwhelming that you may question your own sanity.

When grieving the death of a spouse or life partner, you may experience extremely debilitating effects of feeling entirely alone and incomplete. The sense of having lost a central part of yourself is painful and may seem numbing at times. Your immediate world often seems strange and displaced. At times, you are not sure how to cope with life in general. Sometimes you may not want to try. These feelings are normal and should be expected.

When a spouse or life partner dies, you lose the love of your life ... the person on whom you rely for physical and emotional support. On a practical level, there may be an assortment of tasks and needs that now may be left unattended. Learning and fulfilling those roles, alone and unsupported, can be an overwhelming task in itself.

Loss of Your Best Friend

A death caused by a drunk driving crash is sudden and is usually more difficult to cope with than an expected death. When a person is violently killed, the death can be even more traumatic. Surviving family members and friends are emotionally assaulted with no time to gradually prepare for the loss. You could have never prepared for the incapacitating blow caused by your loved one's traumatic death.

A drunk driving crash comes without warning. The shock can be overwhelming. As human beings, we form strong physical and emotional bonds to

Many people struggle for months and years before they feel diminished intensity in their grief. others. When these physical and emotional attachments are severed, we cope with the loss by grieving. This is especially true when a spouse or life partner dies. You miss your loved one's physical presence as well as their personality, loyalty and spirit. All of these components add up to an interaction that was above all highly valued.

You may feel as though you have lost your best friend. When your spouse has also been your best friend, you experience a loss that has many parts. You have lost the companion with whom you shared activities. Even if your spouse did not participate in every activity with you, he or she acknowledged it and accepted your needs.

You received daily physical contact to which you have become accustomed: the pat on your

shoulder when you worked in the kitchen, the hand on your elbow when you went down the stairs, the smoothing of your hair, the straightening of your tie.

You will deal with grief in countless ways. Grief is not an event but a process of experiencing the physical, emotional, mental, social and spiritual effects of a death or other loss. Grief reactions are common to most people although each person grieves in their own way and in their own time.

How you grieve depends on a number of things, including: prior coping skills, quality and duration of the relationship with the person who was killed, circumstances surrounding the death, previous losses previously endured, emotional support from family and friends and cultural background.

Friends and even some family members may be ill prepared to support you while you grieve. Many people who attempt to comfort victims/survivors, including some professionals, do not understand that intense and long lasting grief are appropriate for victims of drunk driving crashes. Secondary victimizations can add to the trauma when survivors experience rejection from society or callousness from services and programs that are supposed to be helpful.

For many people grief is uncharted territory and can be very unsettling. Understanding more about your grief will not change how you feel about the death of your loved one, but it may help you to feel more comfortable with the process.

Adjusting to a New Identity

Death is accepted as an inevitability of life. Most of us understand that with the death of a loved one comes pain and suffering. However, in order to fully appreciate the impact of death, it is important to consider the significance of human relationships.

The degree of pain and suffering that follows a death is directly related to the nature of the relationship between the survivor and the person who died. Being bereaved means that you are no longer a wife, husband or partner, but a widow or widower. The words sound harsh and take a while to adapt to. Adjusting to the loneliness of being single can be a major problem, because as you get older it can be more difficult to make new friends.

When your partner died, you lost a best friend, lover, primary confidant and perhaps co-parent. You lost such an essential part of yourself that you may

Without the relationship, the death would carry no meaning and cause no suffering.

feel incomplete and abandoned. Making major decisions alone while maintaining a family can be extremely difficult. Facing

financial responsibilities without your partner's input may add to your burden.

GRIEF RESPONSES

Physical Symptoms

During the first six months to a year after a fatal crash, people are vulnerable to physical illness.

Physical complaints, aches and illness are all common in people who are grieving.

Medical experts have found evidence that intense grief weakens the immune system.

There is also evidence that people beset by grief become vulnerable to other sorts of accidents, because they are preoccupied with their loss. Your body's immune system is working overtime, and you may feel worn out. This is your body's reaction to the trauma you have experienced...listen to your body cues.

You may have difficulty sleeping, or you may want to sleep all the time. You may feel nauseous and

Maintain regular contact with your physician for a year or two to be sure that you do not acquire a stress-related physical condition.

quit eating, or feel ravenous and eat everything in sight.

Whatever you are feeling, you are not imagining things.

During this early period of grief, eat well, get plenty of rest and talk to someone about seeing your doctor if the problems persist.

Some people find the pain too difficult and turn to alcohol or drugs to ease the pain. Unfortunately, there is no easy fix to make the loss easier to bear. Alcohol and drugs both are likely to make the situation more difficult to cope with, because

both will contribute to irrational thoughts and depressed moods.

You may need short-term medication prescribed by your doctor to help you eat or sleep while grieving. If so, do not consider it a weakness. You have suffered severe trauma and professional help can help you to begin feeling better. You will probably need the help of prescribed medication only for a short time. Even if you do not want to feel better, you owe it to yourself and your family to stay in good health.

Denial

Denial is a wonderful thing. It is the mind's way of buffering the full impact of a trauma until it can be absorbed. Upon learning that a loved one has been killed, most people are rendered too weak to undertake the overwhelming task of grieving.

When you heard of your partner's death, you may have gone into shock. Going into shock is something like feeling the effects of a general anesthetic. With the help of a quick spurt of adrenaline and other chemicals in your brain, your initial response may have been "fight" or "flight." Fighters sometimes scream so they will not hear the message or physically attack the person who has delivered the bad news. Those whose reaction is "flight" may faint or run to try to escape the pain.

Regardless of the initial impact, if you are like most people, you soon found yourself in a state of

numbness. Looking back now you may wonder how you remained calm. You may have completed some tasks that now seem impossible. You probably have a hard time remembering exactly what you did during those first few days.

During this time, people may have assumed that you were strong when you were actually in shock. You may have appeared strong but felt more like a robot, going through the motions.

Denial following a violent and unanticipated death is considered normal and functional. It allows a person to travel through grief at their own pace and serves them well until they are stronger and better able to cope. It is impossible to push through any part of grieving in order to get over it. If you cannot think clearly, if you seem forgetful and detached, be patient with yourself. If you need help, please ask for it.

Fear/Vulnerability

Any person who is experiencing a major change or loss will feel afraid...this is normal. Fear may be a strong reaction during the first few months after the death of a spouse or life partner.

You may fear taking care of your life. You may fear driving by yourself, shopping by yourself, caring for your children or sleeping in your house alone. This type of situation can be very frightening to someone who is already experiencing the stress produced by an unexpected death.

Many victims/survivors are surprised to find that they feel anxious, fearful and powerless after the violent death of a loved one. Before the crash, you may have assumed you were immune to crime. Now

Some people find it difficult to think positively about the future and may begin to fear living in their home alone.

you may feel that life is out of balance and that the world no longer makes sense. The part of you that was previously

confident and carefree has been damaged.

We tend to believe that good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. For you, this belief no longer makes sense. Instead you may feel that you and your remaining loved ones are more vulnerable than other people. It is important to think rationally and work hard to risk going out, even when it frightens you. Little by little you can overcome your fears.

Anger

Anger is a common grief reaction. You may be surprised by the intensity of anger you may feel for the person that caused the crash. You may find that your anger is directed toward members of the legal system or hospital staff. However illogical it may seem, many people direct feelings of anger at a family member or friend, or even at themselves for not having prevented the unpreventable. You may even be angry at everything and everyone.

You may wish desperately that the person who caused the crash that killed your loved one would show some remorse and say, "I'm sorry." That

probably will not happen. Many offenders do not express remorse although some are indeed sorry. However, their attorneys warn them to make no contact with the victim's family because such contact can be considered an admission of guilt.

The injustice of your spouse or life partner's death, the deep hurt you feel and the loss of future dreams may all add up to rage. Most of the things you think about doing must remain undone, like harming the offender. It is important not to act destructively in response to your anger.

Many people find it beneficial to talk with someone about feelings of anger or rage. Expressing these feelings can free the mind, enabling you to be more open and realistic in your thinking and planning for the future. Physical activity often helps. Some people run, exercise vigorously or clean house. Others write in journals or write letters to the offender, which are better left unsent. Some cry, yell and scream. What you do with your anger really does not matter as long as you acknowledge it and you do not hurt yourself or anyone else in expressing it.

Your anger may be serving a deeper purpose, a profound sadness. Even though anger does not feel good, it can seem less painful than sadness. Anger can either be focused on someone else or it can be directed in a wide spectrum, not seeming to attach to anyone or anything. Sadness is yours. It is focused within. You will eventually need to give up some of

the anger, rage and vengeance to experience the sadness underneath it.

You may think that you owe it to your loved one to remain angry. What you do with your anger and when you decide to look beneath it are up to you. When you decide to look beneath the anger, you may find intense agony. By being willing to face it you may find some relief.

Guilt

Anger frequently becomes guilt over time. Guilt is feeling somehow responsible for what happened, or thinking that you did not do enough in the relationship while your loved one was alive. You may say to yourself, “If only I had known,” or “If only I told him I loved him.” Guilt involves a lot of “should haves” or “should not haves.” Regrets are normal, but you cannot change the past.

Possibly the toughest job you will have in grieving is to look rationally at how your beliefs

Many people find it beneficial to work through feelings of anger and guilt with a professional counselor.

make you feel guilty. You may, indeed, be responsible for some component of your partner’s death. If so, acknowledge it and see if you

can find a way to forgive yourself. If you made a bad judgment, you probably made the best one you knew how to make at the time. Try not to exaggerate your role in your loved one’s death.

Talking with others who have some understanding of your experience can help you look at your guilt realistically. It will be hard work for them and for you. Feeling less guilty will not take away your sadness or your anger, but it can be a big load off your shoulders. It will be worth the effort to rid yourself of it.

Healing cannot take place if you do not express what you are feeling and thinking about the loss. Both positive and negative emotions need to be expressed.

COPING

When a spouse or life partner is killed, some people feel that they will never be happy again. Some victims/survivors go through a period of time when they are not ready to feel better. Others are eager to feel better and work to find ways to do it. Whether you are ready to feel better or not, you might want to look to others who have survived the ordeal and have managed to regain strength and find happiness again. They can be encouraging role models.

The world is forever changed when someone experiences a trauma. Safety, security, predictability and sense of control are all distorted. In order to regain a more accurate perspective of the world around you, you can work toward some type of understanding about the crash.

This search for meaning involves acknowledging your trauma and asking questions. At times, there are no answers but it is nonetheless

important to get answers to those you can. Asking specific questions about the crash and obtaining a copy of the crash report are ways to begin.

Investigating potential financial resources can help alleviate some of the financial stressors you are experiencing. Likewise, researching the criminal and civil justice systems can also empower you. There are agencies and written materials that can aid you in understanding your options.

As with the many challenges we face in life, the methods of coping you choose can either be

Coping Tips:

- *Tell your story, over and over again*
- *Get support from a professional counselor or support group in your area, if you feel you are ready*
- *Write about your experience in a journal*
- *Seek information about your loved one's crash, to answer those unanswered questions*
- *Understand that everyone grieves differently, and be especially sensitive to family members who may be grieving differently than you*
- *Reinvest in life by reaching out to others*

productive or damaging. They can be either healthy or self-defeating. Coping is an attempt to adapt your new circumstances into your existing life. You may try a variety of means to achieve this, some that work and others that do not.

Your life will not be the same as it was before your partner was killed. Learning to manage grief requires that you recognize, acknowledge and accept all that is involved in the journey. Many people describe the grief process as a roller coaster ride with

difficulties along the way. However painful and

difficult, grieving is necessary to heal and to find new meaning in life.

EXPRESSING YOUR FEELINGS

Healing cannot take place unless you express or vent what you are feeling and thinking. Allow yourself to talk about the type of person your spouse or life partner was, share favorite memories and reveal the qualities of your life that you miss most.

It is important for both men and women to find a way that is comfortable to express feelings. Societal expectations make it more difficult for the widower to share feelings. Generally, men do not have the same type of peer support systems that women may have. A man may feel that to unburden himself frequently may be a sign that he is weak and vulnerable.

Women are more adapted to establishing relationships through verbal interaction. Sharing and talking translates as a way to form stronger bonds. Men generally bond through activities.

If there is no friend, family member or confidant to fill the role of a listener, do not withdraw. If you do not feel comfortable in one-on-one situation, try attending a grief support group. Other members of a support group will be familiar with your feelings and reactions. There is also no pressure to share until you are comfortable.

FINANCIAL WORRIES

Numerous financial situations occur following the death of a spouse or life partner. Financial matters are not always in order. When the spouse who died was the money manager and financial planner, the surviving spouse may not be aware of the location, amount and distribution of resources. Even when financial matters have been attended to, they may be shockingly insufficient.

Financial complications of insufficient resources can produce a variety of emotions in the spouse survivor including anxiety, fear, shame and anger. Emotional energy can be completely depleted by the economics of survival.

One of the most strenuous challenges after the death of a spouse or life partner is making decisions alone. Many decisions that need to be made may revolve around finances. It is necessary to realize that during the first year following the death of your loved one, you are under a great deal of stress and may not make the best decisions. It is important that whenever possible, postpone making major life-altering decisions. Avoid major changes such as selling your house, moving, quitting a job or re-marrying. If you must make a major change because of a changed financial status, seek the advice of a knowledgeable family member, friend or professional.

Depending on the status of the partner who died, you may now be in a position of seeking employment. Being the sole earner for the family may be initially daunting. If you have children, you not only have your own grief to cope with, but theirs as well. While children may be a comfort, it can be hard to make time for them and to be sensitive to their needs. The increased responsibility of bringing up children on your own may seem overwhelming.

DEALING WITH PERSONAL BELONGINGS

Going through your loved one's personal belongings

Helpful Tips:

- *Ask a close friend or family member to assist you*
- *Collect empty boxes ahead of time and designate a box for articles to keep, ones to give to a certain person, and ones to give to charity*
- *Give thought and decide what to do with belongings*

can be a difficult task. Some survivors are able to deal with the process soon after the funeral; others find the task daunting. Do not force yourself to do it. Take your time. There is no "best" timeframe.

It takes a great deal of energy and stamina to deal with personal belongings.

When you have the energy to deal with them, you will. If needed, be sure to ask for assistance. You do not have to face this challenge alone.

MOURNING AND TRIGGERING EVENTS

You will always feel sorrowful knowing that your loved one died tragically and that the long relationship you might have enjoyed was cut short. However, this sorrow is not the emotional equivalent to the intense grief that most victims/survivors experience for the first months or years. A sense of sorrow is not the same as being overwhelmed by grief.

While the initial responses to the death are defined by the term grief, mourning refers to the internal processes associated with adapting to life without your loved one. Some have described mourning as a “misty fog on life.” You are not always aware, yet you realize that life is not quite as bright, not quite as light as it was before. Your values may have changed and you may be impatient with things you deem unimportant or trivial.

It is likely that you will experience twinges of grief from time to time for many years. Victims/survivors are often surprised to find that in the midst of a series of good days, something brings on an episode of grief. Strange as it may seem, these episodes of grief can be understood as celebrations, celebrations of a relationship that meant so much to you that episodes of grief can still overcome you from time to time.

Anniversaries, holidays and birthdays often trigger reminders of the death or absence of your loved one. Perhaps the most significant and most difficult anniversary is that of the crash. The annual date of the crash may cause anticipatory anxiety and can contribute to renewed grief for victims/survivors.

The first anniversary will most likely be the most painful; however, it may also be an opportunity to respond to the death in a manner that was denied at the time of the crash. Commemorating your loved one's death on this day helps everyone to celebrate the life that was lost.

Other annual celebrations, such as religious holidays, birthdays, Thanksgiving, Father's Day and Mother's Day will continue to take place year after year. In the past, these times of joy brought your family together. Now and forever, they will trigger memories of your loved one.

Today these holidays will be difficult, but later will provide you with reasons to reminisce and begin new rituals. Planning ahead for holidays and birthdays not only allows you to prepare for those events, but also provides ongoing and open communication between family members.

As time passes, the memories associated with your loved one will no longer evoke the same intensely painful thoughts and feelings. The loss will take on new meaning and the context of your relationship will change. Eventually you will develop a renewed perspective of the world around you.

HEALING

Getting Better

You will never forget what happened. If you are afraid to get better because you think you might forget your beloved partner, know that you will never forget. You will always cherish the memory of your loved one. You will always regret that you were unable to share life with him or her for many more years. In time, you will remember the happy memories more often than the painful ones which fill your mind now.

Nearly all victims/survivors are able to say that they are grateful they shared life with their loved one as long as they did, rather than wishing he or she had never been born. To experience depths of sadness and heights of joy is to be fully alive, fully human. Most people are glad they are capable of having strong feelings. Having feelings means that shock symptoms and numbness are no longer necessary and the fullness of the experience of the trauma can be absorbed.

Getting better means:

- Solving problems and completing tasks in your daily work route again;
- Sleeping well and having energy again;
- Feeling good enough about yourself to be hopeful about the rest of your life;
- Being able to enjoy the pleasurable and beautiful things in life again.

You probably will be able to achieve these in time. For most people it takes years and hard work.

Looking Ahead

Other components of healing are an increased focus on life and a decreased focus on death. Early in your grief you may have felt that you barely existed. When others told you to cheer up and get on with your life, there seemed to be an unwillingness to share your grief journey. You may feel disappointed, frustrated and angry at their lack of sensitivity and understanding. Ultimately, you will have to decide when it is right to give more of your attention to living. You can use your grief to continue to drag you down, or you can use it to rebuild your life, probably with more compassion and understanding than you had before.

You may understand, in a way most people do not, how vulnerable we all are and how important it is to make each day count. You may never feel quite as safe as you once did, nor quite as trusting. These are changes that often occur after enormous loss. They are all compatible with healing.

For some, enduring trauma ignites a spark of activity to right some of the wrongs involved in a sudden violent death. Most victims/survivors want to prevent it for others. Thousands of men, women and teenagers have joined Mothers Against Drunk Driving after their loved ones were killed. MADD helps injured victims and families of those killed to cope emotionally, helps victims/survivors through the criminal justice system, and works to prevent drunk driving crashes.

MADD and other organizations similar to **MADD** can provide you with the opportunity to do what you can so others do not experience the tragedy you have. Some people find it helps them enormously to work to end drunk driving and victimization. It can feel as though it is the one activity that might bring something constructive out of their loss.

Going on can be a way of showing that life, as it was represented in your spouse or life partner, matters to you. It can be important too for others who love you and depend on you. For your own sake and for the sake of those who need you and love you, you have a responsibility to try to heal. It is extremely difficult to heal from the pain and grief associated with the traumatic death of a loved one. You could not prevent the outcome of the drunk driving crash that killed your loved one. You can, however, control how you choose to cope with their death, and how you choose to live the rest of your life.

*For more information or assistance
visit MADD's website at www.madd.org
or call 1-877-MADD-HELP (1-877-623-3435).*



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