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From This Day Forward

The death of a spouse can leave the surviving partner struggling with a new reality

Couples share a connection that's different—and in some ways stronger—than any other relationship. It's a bond that has its own language, its own common memories and rituals...some would even say, a life of its own. And it's supposed to last a lifetime.

When that shared life is shattered by the death of a spouse, it means learning to live without a best friend, lover, primary confidant and, perhaps, co-parent. And it means that there is no more couple; the "we" becomes an "I."

Everything in the surviving partner's life changes—routines are different, emotional stability is challenged and even sense of self has to be redefined. And if the death was sudden and traumatic, as it often is with a drunk driving crash, the shock can be overwhelming.

Vikki Miller and Linda Turner are still reeling from that shock. Vikki became a widow when she was 49; Linda was just 28.

When their respective husbands died, both felt as if a part of them had died as well. And in a way, it had.

Identity Crisis

"I felt as though my life had ended," Linda says of her husband Kurt's death six years ago when he was killed by a drunk driver in a

head-on collision. At the time of his death, their only child, Jonathan, was just 8 months old.

"It felt like an out-of-body experience and it was difficult to carry on with even the simplest of everyday tasks," she says.

When a beloved spouse dies, the identity of wife, husband or partner is gone, replaced with the new harsher identity of widow or widower. Following the death, surviving spouses often speak of the debilitating effects of feeling entirely alone and incomplete. Adjusting to this loneliness can be a major hurdle.

"When my husband died, I literally felt like half of me had been ripped off. I didn't feel

complete," Linda says. "Then there was the added isolation of becoming a widow at such a young age."

According to Linda McCune, a licensed professional counselor in private practice in Dallas, Texas, "When a life partner dies, the surviving partner must adjust to a new identity. This readjustment is unexpected and can cause an emotional overload. There is a sense of losing an essential part of oneself."

And this sense of loss is so painful and disorienting that the immediate world often seems odd and distanced. When the spouse's death is sudden and tragic, the adjustment can be crippling.

"It's been an extremely challenging six years without my husband and in trying to live with the tragedy and injustice of it all," Linda says with weight in her voice.

Although it's been seven years since her husband, Bill, was killed in a drunk driving crash, Vikki is still adjusting to her new identity. "He was simply driving to work," Vikki says. "My sweet, loving husband was killed instantly and without warning."

When a person is violently killed, surviving family members and friends are emotionally assaulted with no time to prepare. Their world is forever changed and their safety, security, predictability and sense of control are distorted.

While nothing can bring back a loved one killed as the result of a drunk driving crash, understanding the circumstances of the death and learning the

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details of the crash can help you gain a more accurate perspective. This search for meaning involves acknowledging the trauma and asking questions. But be prepared because, sometimes, there are no answers, and other times even more questions arise.

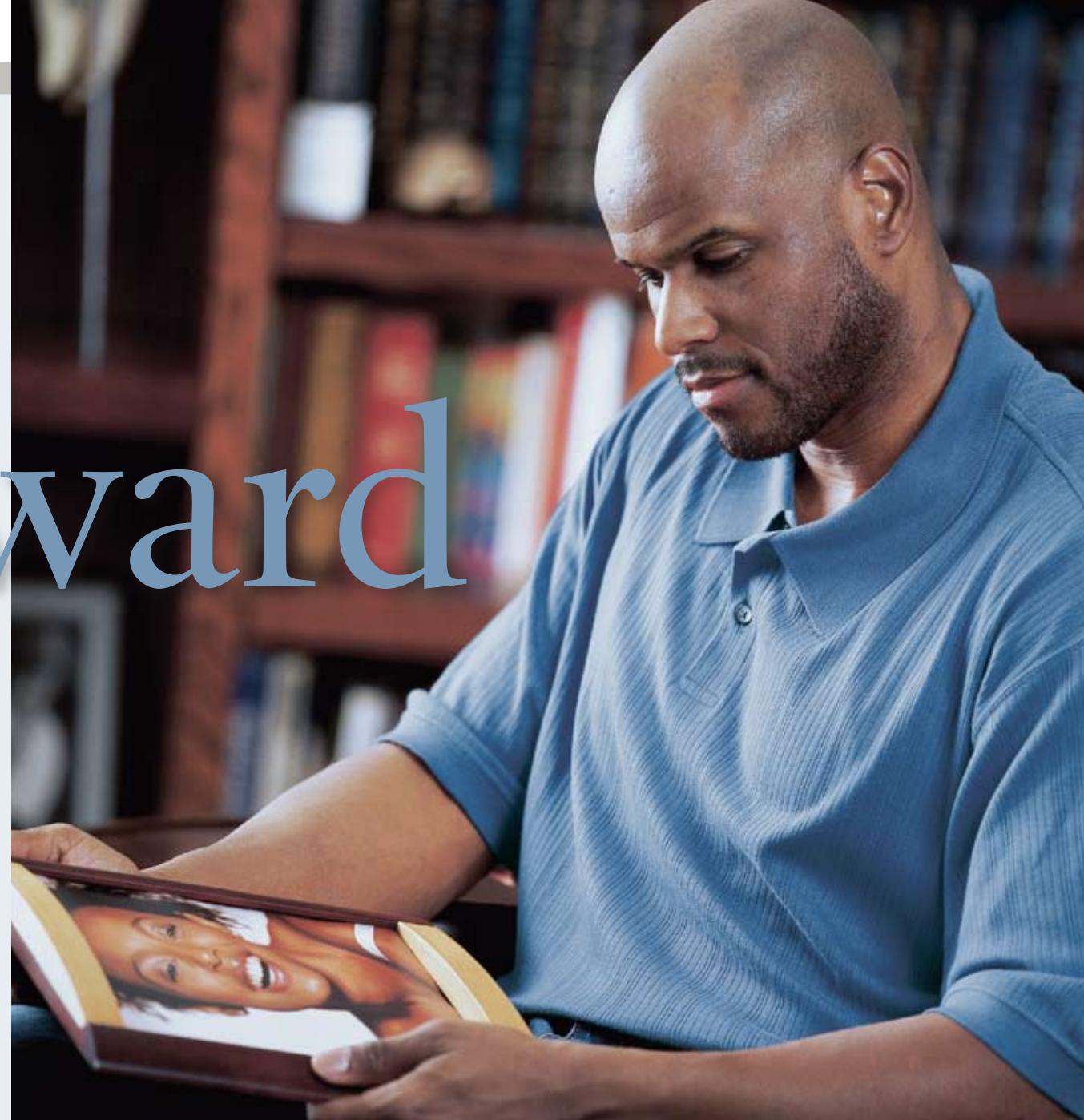
"With a traumatic death, a bereaved partner has to deal with secondary losses such as the loss of the present and the projected future. It's like peeling back the layers of an onion," McCune says. "Each time you peel back one layer, another is discovered."

First Things First

On a practical level, when a life partner dies, there is an assortment of tasks and needs that may be neglected. For example, if one partner always dealt with the financial matters or house repairs, the surviving spouse may find it difficult to manage the new responsibilities, particularly in the first six months.

"After the shock began to wear off, it was overwhelming to realize that I now had to do everything alone," Linda recalls.

Unfamiliar tasks can be daunting, especially in the grips of grief. Neighbors, friends or family



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members are a great resource for getting tasks taken care of until the surviving spouse feels strong enough to start handling the chores on his or her own. It's also important to realize that it will not happen all at once. Starting with small steps is OK. Someone who has never dealt with the family finances should not expect to immediately become a financial wizard. Simply going to the bank is a good first step.

While the surviving partner may feel like practical matters are getting under control, the burden of every task and decision now resting on his or her shoulders can be a frightening prospect.

"One of the most strenuous challenges after the death of a life partner is making decisions alone," McCune says. "Acute grief can cloud decision-making. It is necessary to realize that during the first year following the death of a loved one, there is added stress and it is difficult to concentrate. Decisions made while under this additional stress may not be the best decisions."

Whenever possible, wait until after the first year of grief to make major, life-altering decisions such as selling the house, quitting a job or remarrying. If you have to make one of those decisions due to changed financial status, seek the advice of a trusted and knowledgeable family member, friend or professional.

"We built our dream home together and moved in 10 months prior to Bill's death," Vikki shares. "Since he was the major breadwinner, I had no choice but to downsize and sell our home a year and half later. I felt re-victimized, but it seems trivial to focus on a house when the loneliness was the worst part."

Navigating the Journey through Grief

How a person copes with the death of a life partner depends on a number of things, including innate coping skills, the quality and duration of the relationship with the person who died, circumstances surrounding the death, losses previously endured, and the level of emotional support he or she receives from family and friends.

"I was completely numb," Vikki says of the first couple of years following Bill's death. "Some days, I would literally sit on the floor and not know what to do next."

For many, grief is uncharted territory that can be unsettling and scary. Understanding more about grief does not change the void you feel, but it may help make the healing process easier to endure. Part of that understanding is

recognizing the emotional losses and challenges of the death of a spouse.

"At 28 years old, I was left with no husband and a baby to raise on my own," Linda says. "During my initial grief, I couldn't function, I couldn't be a mom."

Coping with suddenly becoming a single parent can be doubly challenging, because not only do you have to deal with *your* grief, but you have to help your children grieve as well. And although children may be a comfort, making time for them and being sensitive to their needs can be difficult when your own grief has left you unable to concentrate and struggling just to get through day-to-day life.

But learning to let go of day-to-day things that can wait, such as household chores, allows a focus on the children and what is important to them in their new world. Accept help from others when offered and give yourself permission to let go. It's OK to put things off in order to be present for

survival strategies

Every grief journey is unique. While you need to find coping strategies that work for you, you might keep in mind the things listed below, which have been helpful for many other grieving spouses.

- There is no "right" or "wrong" way to grieve.
- Seek ongoing support.
- Accept help when it's offered.
- Tell your story over and over again.
- Find out what helps you work through grief: reading books, keeping a journal, talking aloud or writing a letter to the person who died, or engaging in physical activity.
- Postpone major decisions until you feel strong enough to make them.
- Anticipate difficult times—holidays, birthdays, anniversaries—and plan how to deal with rekindled memories and feelings.
- Seek out good legal and financial advice.
- Attend support groups.
- If needed, reach out for professional counseling for additional support.

your children. A perfectly arranged home does not guarantee healthy grieving children.

Another aspect a bereaved partner may find difficult to adjust to is the loss of physical companionship. Surviving spouses miss the simple act of holding hands or hugging, and not having someone to come home to at the end of the day can be a crushing void.

There also may be a time when well-meaning loved ones will feel the surviving spouse should have moved past the grief. Spending time with others who have survived the death of a spouse and have regained strength and happiness can provide hope and encouragement.

"I joined a support group for young widows," Linda says of her experience. "I found a connection with others who were dealing with loneliness, isolation and single-parenting issues. It is vital to reach out to others for support."

Also, become your own best friend. Being alone is challenging because it forces us to solve our own problems and enjoy our own company. Be guided by strength rather than loneliness.

Getting Better

Getting better doesn't mean forgetting or that you don't love your spouse. There will always be cherished memories and you will always have a special love in your heart for your partner. But give yourself permission to take time off from the grief. Time does not heal all wounds, but it can be a buffer. You don't have to absorb it all at once.

"It is important for a bereaved partner to 'build a toolbox' of coping mechanisms to manage thoughts and feelings," McCune says.

These tools, including reaching out for support, asking for help, joining a support group, journaling or learning new skills, can help surviving spouses focus on their feelings and process their thoughts, which are important to healthy healing.

"Above all, listen to your own heart and mind," McCune says.

"I am much better," Vikki says. "I still miss Bill every day, but I am channeling my grief in positive ways."

Going on can be a way of showing that life, as it was represented in your loved one, matters to you. It also can be important for others who love and depend on you.

"I found buried treasures inside of me that I did not realize existed," Linda says. "I gained gifts from this experience and I try to share those gifts with others." ■