

Coping with the Death of a Spouse: A Map of the Territory

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For: EstateVaults.com

It is said that the only constant in life is change and impermanence. If your marriage isn't cut short by divorce or separation, it will end in the death of a partner. For you, the surviving spouse, dealing with the loss of a life companion is one of the hardest hands life will deal you. And if you embrace the process with courage and awareness and give yourself permission and time to grieve you will come out the other side a deeper and stronger person with resources you didn't even know you possessed. Although the pain of such a loss can be intense and consuming in the early stages of your grief, there will come a time, I promise, when your memories of your partner flood you with feelings of warmth, poignancy and love instead of tears. A time when you can fully appreciate how your love and relationship and the work you have done to make peace with its ending have enriched your life.

The loss of a loved one, especially one you've built your life around, is painful and profound. Grief is the natural inner reaction to loss, and the magnitude of your loss is enormous. This transition may come with many losses-- of love and companionship, your sense of role and identity, your feelings of security, your shared history and plans for the future. It also can subject you to significant changes in the shape of your life: changes in your financial status and lifestyle, challenges of single parenting, new tasks and responsibilities that you must now assume, and changes in your social relationships. It will challenge you to dig deep and call forth a new identity in the world and a new sense of meaning in your life. You will prevail. But first, you must grieve.

Grief has many faces and no two people experience it the same way and in the same time frame. There is no reliable map of the territory, only a sequence of experiencing unique to who you are, the nature of your relationship, the circumstances surrounding your loss, the support available to you, and your ability to trust that you will know exactly how to do this thing called grieving.

It is common to think about recovering from a great loss in terms of a passage through the stages of grieving. But these "stages" are fluid and often overlap and interact and frequently demand revisiting over and over again. There is no fixed order to them. So it may be more useful to think about the grieving process in terms of the tasks and challenges you will be called upon to grapple with as you move through this life-changing transition: coming to grips with your loss, embracing the pain, savoring the memories of your lost love, developing a new self-image, finding new meaning in life, and reaching out and accepting support from others.

Even with no hard-and-fast map of the grieving process, there are guideposts. So if you' re facing this life transition, what might you expect?

In the beginning...Shock, Numbness, and Denial

At first, you may experience shock, numbness, and disbelief. This is nature' s way of protecting you while you summon your inner resources to deal with what has happened to your world. It is difficult to wrap the mind around death, and to assimilate the reality that this person whom you have loved for so many years will never, ever be in your life again on a physical level. It is common to feel that the rug has been pulled out from under you. You may feel dazed and suspended in mid-air. It may feel like you' ve gone mad or landed on an alien planet.

Your body will have its own reactions to the loss. Sleep may be difficult and eating unthinkable for a while. You may experience nausea, dizziness, difficulty breathing, listlessness and fatigue. You may be more vulnerable to illness. Don' t worry. This is all within the range of what is normal for someone experiencing such a profound loss.

Reality sets in

With the passage of time--maybe days or weeks later-- the numbness will make way for glimpses of your new reality-- that this change is forever-- and feelings of intense grief. Everyone' s experience of this is unique, but some responses are commo, such as feelings of deep loneliness, episodes of emotional flooding, a longing for what was, regret over what will never be, anger at God and the doctors for failing your partner, or at

your partner for abandoning you, guilt over your anger, feelings of fear for your survival, agitation, and chaos. Not uncommon are feelings of relief, especially when the dying process was long and painful. By this time most of your friends and family who supported you so well during the early days and weeks of your loss will have returned to their own concerns, and you will be facing what feels like an abyss--on your own. It is the work of this phase to come to grips with the reality of your loss.

Intense grieving is not an experience that anyone would choose to feel. But it is exactly what you need to go through-- whole heartedly-- if you are to reach a new level of personal integration and a new relationship to your loss and to your self. Our culture doesn't support the timetable needed for grieving. Many well-meaning friends and family members will rush you and encourage you to "get on with your life" or to "keep busy" and distract yourself from the pain of your situation. It is hard for all of us to tolerate such intense pain and to confront mortality. Both of these challenges will be part of your recovery.

Finally there's integration and recovery

It's not that your grief will totally disappear. But with time you will recover. It may take a year or two, or perhaps even longer. Be concerned and seek professional help if you are still deep in the throes of intense grief, feel worthless or suicidal, or are experiencing numbness or depression. Your difficulties and challenges should become substantially easier and more manageable with time. This part of grief's terrain brings more peace in relationship to this new phase of your life. You may see your life from a new perspective. You may develop a new relationship with your spouse-- a relationship of memory. It may take many months or even years, but eventually you will reorganize your life and arrive at a new level of personal integration, independence, and purpose. Grief can be transformative. It can give you the opportunity to discover or rediscover strengths and talents that have been dormant and undeveloped, and aspirations placed on hold. You may find yourself asking the big questions, "Who am I now?" "What is my life about?" and challenging your beliefs and assumptions about what is important in life. Losing a spouse and the passage that follows presents a unique opportunity for growth and creativity.

In our lives there is a time and place for grief. There is also a time and place for healing. With the passage of time memories of your loved one will move into a place in your heart and mind as a treasured keepsake, one you can pull out from time to time to bathe you in comfort, warmth and love.