

Living through the Death of your Partner or Spouse

The death of your partner at any age is one of the most challenging events of your life. How you grieve depends on many factors, including how long you were together, whether their death was sudden or expected, the support you have afterwards, your financial situation and, most importantly, whether, over time, you are able to make sense of what has happened.

For many years, the emphasis in helping the bereaved was on recovery, as if bereavement was an illness. During the last two decades, the focus has shifted, and today the need to adapt to this life event is seen as one of the key factors in coping with the death of a partner or spouse.

Adapting to life without your partner is a process that takes time. How you use that time is very important. The more challenging your bereavement, the more you will have to adapt and cope. That is why, for example, the death of your partner in the first ten years of marriage can be traumatic; your expectation of a long life together has also been taken away. Likewise a couple who have spent most of their adult lives married to each other may not be able to imagine living in the world without their spouse. Both of these bereavements bring their own particular challenges.

You may experience many different emotions; from initial numbness and shock, even when the death was expected, to anger and frustration at the change in your life, to an often overwhelming sadness at the unfairness of it all.

Although thinking about bereavement in stages may help you, don't expect it to follow any set course. The same feelings may come back again in the future, and not everyone will experience the same feelings. Think of it as a train journey where there are many stations on the journey. Whether you get off the train at a particular station and how long you wait at that station depends on your unique circumstances. There is no right way to make this journey and no right amount of time it should take.

The last station on the grief journey, in terms of adapting and coping, is the most important one. This is the stop where you are able to make sense of the death of your partner or spouse. This may be through spiritual beliefs (because you believe you will be reunited in the future) or because you are able to say 'I am glad my partner is no longer suffering'. Or perhaps you come to understand and accept that the world is an unpredictable place with no guarantees about anything.

All relationships have their ups and downs and you may get stuck in the 'if onlys' when your partner dies. If you have feelings of guilt, ask someone you trust if they are reasonable. It is easy to feel unnecessarily guilty for things we did or said.

Your biggest day-to-day challenge may be the loneliness caused by the loss of your intimate relationship. You may feel as if you have lost some part of yourself. You may also miss having a sexual partner. You may feel embarrassed or shy about having such feelings even though they are perfectly normal.

Being with your partner has influenced not only your life but also the very person you are. Your view of yourself and the world is bound up in the fact that you shared your life with them, and they will continue to be important in your life even after their death.

The death of your partner or spouse is not just about the loss of their physical presence. It can also mean the loss of a friend, soul mate, wage earner or co-parent. Sometimes these losses don't become apparent for a while after the death, so it is important that you have good support in the second and third year after the death.

Losing your partner can feel overwhelming, particularly in the first two to three years. Grief is our natural reaction to a significant loss and most bereaved partners work through their grief with the support of family and friends.

If you are struggling with your grief please seek support from a counsellor or a local support group. You may find this helps if there was a lot of conflict in your relationship or if you were very dependent on your partner or spouse.

What may help

- Try to get back to a normal routine.
- Take physical exercise, even a 10 minute walk every day.
- Choose your support wisely. Don't let your grief be dictated by others. This is your grief and you know best how to express it.
- Remind yourself of what your partner brought to your life and find ways to have a continuing relationship with them.
- With care, support and understanding you can learn to adapt to this loss.

What doesn't help

Try not to use alcohol, drugs or sleeping pills as ways of coping. While they may provide temporary relief, they are not a long-term solution. Talk to your doctor if you are having trouble sleeping or functioning.