

Helping Yourself Heal When Your Spouse Dies

by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

“The experience of grief is powerful. So, too, is your ability to help yourself heal. In doing the work of grieving, you are moving toward a renewed sense of meaning and purpose in your life.”

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Acknowledge your loss

Few events in life are as painful as the death of your spouse. You may be uncertain you will survive this overwhelming loss. At times, you may be uncertain you even have the energy or desire to try to heal. You are beginning a journey that is often frightening, overwhelming and sometimes lonely. This article provides practical suggestions to help you move toward healing in your personal grief experience.

Allow yourself to mourn

Your husband or wife has died. This was your companion, the person you shared your life with. If right now you are not sure of who you are, and you feel confused, that is appropriate because you have lost a part of yourself. When you experience the death of someone you love, live with, and depend on, feeling disoriented is natural. You are now faced with the difficult, but important need to mourn. Mourning is the open expression of your thoughts and feelings regarding the death of your spouse. It is an essential part of healing.

Recognize your grief is unique

Your grief is unique because no one else had the same relationship you had with your spouse. Your experience will also be influenced by the circumstances surrounding the death, other losses you have experienced, your emotional support system and your cultural and religious background. As a result, you will grieve in your own special way. Don't try to compare your experience with that of others or to adopt assumptions about just how long your grief should last. Consider taking a “one-day-at-a-time” approach that allows you to grieve at your own pace.

Talk out your thought and feelings

Express your grief openly. When you share your grief outside yourself, healing occurs. Allow yourself to talk about the circumstances of the death, your feelings of loss and loneliness, and the special things you miss about your spouse. Talk about the type of person your husband or wife was, activities that you enjoyed together, and memories that bring both laughter and tears. Whatever you do, don't ignore your grief. You have been wounded by this loss, and your wound needs to be attended to. Allow yourself to speak from your heart, not just your head. Doing so doesn't mean you are losing control, or going “crazy.” It is a normal part of your grief journey.

Expect to feel a multitude of emotions

Experiencing the death of your spouse affects your head, heart and spirit, so you may experience a variety of emotions as part of your grief work. It is called work because it takes a great deal of energy and effort to heal. Confusion, disorientation, fear, guilt, relief and anger are just a few of the emotions you may feel. Sometimes these emotions will follow each other within a short period of time. Or they may occur simultaneously.

As strange as some of these emotions may seem, they are normal and healthy. Allow yourself to learn from these feelings. And don't be surprised if out of nowhere you suddenly experience surges of grief, even at the most unexpected times. These grief attacks can be frightening and leave you feeling overwhelmed. They are, however, a natural response to the death of someone loved. Find someone who understands your feelings and will allow you to talk about them.

Find a support system

Reaching out to others and accepting support is often difficult, particularly when you hurt so much. But the most compassionate self-action you can take at this difficult time is to find a support system of caring friends and relatives who will provide the understanding you need. Seek out those persons who will “walk with,” not “in front of” or “behind” you in your journey through grief. Find out if there is a support group in your area that you might want to attend. There is no substitute for learning from other persons who have experienced the death of their spouse. Avoid people who are critical or who try to steal your grief from you. They may tell you “time heals all wounds” or “you will get over it” or “keep your chin up.” While these comments may be well-intentioned, you do not have to accept them. Find those people who encourage you to be yourself and acknowledge your feelings—both happy and sad. You have a right to express your grief; no one has the right to take it away.

Be tolerant of your physical and emotional limits

Your feelings of loss and sadness will probably leave you fatigued. Your ability to think clearly and make decisions may be impaired. And your low energy level may naturally slow you down. Respect what your body and mind are telling you. Get daily rest. Eat balanced meals. Lighten your schedule as much as possible. Ask yourself: Am I treating myself better or worse than I would treat a good friend? Am I being too hard on myself? You may think you should be more capable, more in control, and “getting over” your grief. These are inappropriate expectations and may complicate your healing. Think of it this way: caring for yourself doesn’t mean feeling sorry for yourself; it means you are using your survival skills.

Take your time with your spouse’s personal belongings

You, and only you, should decide what is done with your spouse’s clothes and personal belongings. Don’t force yourself to go through these things until you are ready to. Take your time. Right now you may not have the energy or desire to do anything with them. Remember that some people may try to measure your healing by how quickly they can get you to do something with these belongings. Don’t let them make decisions for you. It isn’t hurting anything to leave your spouse’s belongings right where they are for now. Odds are, when you have the energy to go through them you will. Again, only you should determine when the time is right for you.

Be compassionate with yourself during holidays, anniversaries and special occasions

You will probably find that some days make you miss your spouse more than others. Days and events that held special meaning for you as a couple, such as your birthday, your spouse’s birthday, your wedding anniversary or holidays, may be more difficult to go through by yourself. These events emphasize the absence of your husband or wife. The reawakening of painful emotions may leave you feeling drained. Learn from these feelings and never try to take away the hurt. If you belong to a support group, perhaps you can have a special friend stay in close contact with you during these naturally difficult days.

Treasure your memories

Memories are one of the best legacies that exist after your spouse dies. Treasure those memories that comfort you, but also explore those that may trouble you. Even difficult memories find healing in expression. Share memories with those who listen well and support you. Recognize that your memories may make you laugh or cry. In either case, they are a lasting part of the relationship you had with a very special person in your life.

You may also find comfort in finding a way to commemorate your spouse’s life. If your spouse liked nature, plant a tree you know he or she would have liked. If your spouse liked a certain piece of music, play it often while you embrace some of your favorite memories. Or, you may want to create a memory book of photos that portray your life together as a couple. Remember — healing in grief doesn’t mean forgetting your spouse and the life you shared together.

Embrace your spirituality

If faith is part of your life, express it in ways that seem appropriate to you. Allow yourself to be around people who understand and support your religious beliefs. If you are angry at God because your spouse died, accept this feeling as a normal part of your grief work. Find someone to talk with who won't be critical of whatever thoughts and feelings you need to explore.

You may hear someone say, "With faith, you don't need to grieve." Don't believe it. Having your personal faith does not mean you don't have to talk out and explore your thought and feelings. To deny your grief is to invite problems to build up inside you. Express your faith, but express your grief as well.

Move toward your grief and heal

To restore your capacity to love, you must grieve when your spouse dies. There is no specific point in time that indicates the completion of your grief process. Actually, you don't "get over" grief, you live with it as you choose to go on living. Remember, grief is a process, not an event. Be patient and tolerant with yourself. Be compassionate with yourself as you work to relinquish old roles and establish new ones. No, your life isn't the same, but you deserve to go on living while always remembering the one you loved.

St. Mary of the Annunciation has a grief support group called "**Finding Hope/Healing Hearts**" that uses the materials developed by the author Dr. Alan Wolfelt and offers the opportunity to meet and talk with other people who have experienced a loss. Please contact Diane Mulroe in the parish office for more information or registration.