

How to Cope When Your Partner Dies

Men and women tend to experience grief in different yet normal ways

By Claire Charlton

The death of a partner is one of the most devastating of all life events. Surviving a spouse is something many of us will face, and resources do exist to help ease the trauma.

Loss is a deeply individual experience, says Rose Patterson, co-leader of Widowed Friends, a bereavement support group in metro Detroit.

"There is no right or wrong in the process," she says. "Everyone grieves in their own way and in their own time."

Suddenly Solo

There exist common significant emotional hallmarks of grief, says psychiatrist Howard Belkin, M.D., of Beaumont Health in Troy, who notes that shock is often a first reaction.

"Even when the death is expected, the timing or finality of the death can bring forth feelings of shock and surprise no matter how prepared [a spouse] may be," he says.

Panic, self-blame and even guilt are common feelings.



Howard Belkin

"I was pissed that my whole world was in upheaval and that my rhythm was gone," admits Deborah Narrin of Macomb Township, whose husband died 10 years ago when she was just 47. "Twenty million things are running through your head, especially if you have kids and bills and your income has changed. 'Until death do you part' is kind of true, but you don't think about it when you take your marriage vows."

A therapist with 30 years of experience, Narrin says she found value in connecting with others through a support group and is still a member with Widowed Friends.

"Sharing the experience helps you understand the emotions you can't explain and may not even know are happening to you," she says.

Normal Feelings...or Not?

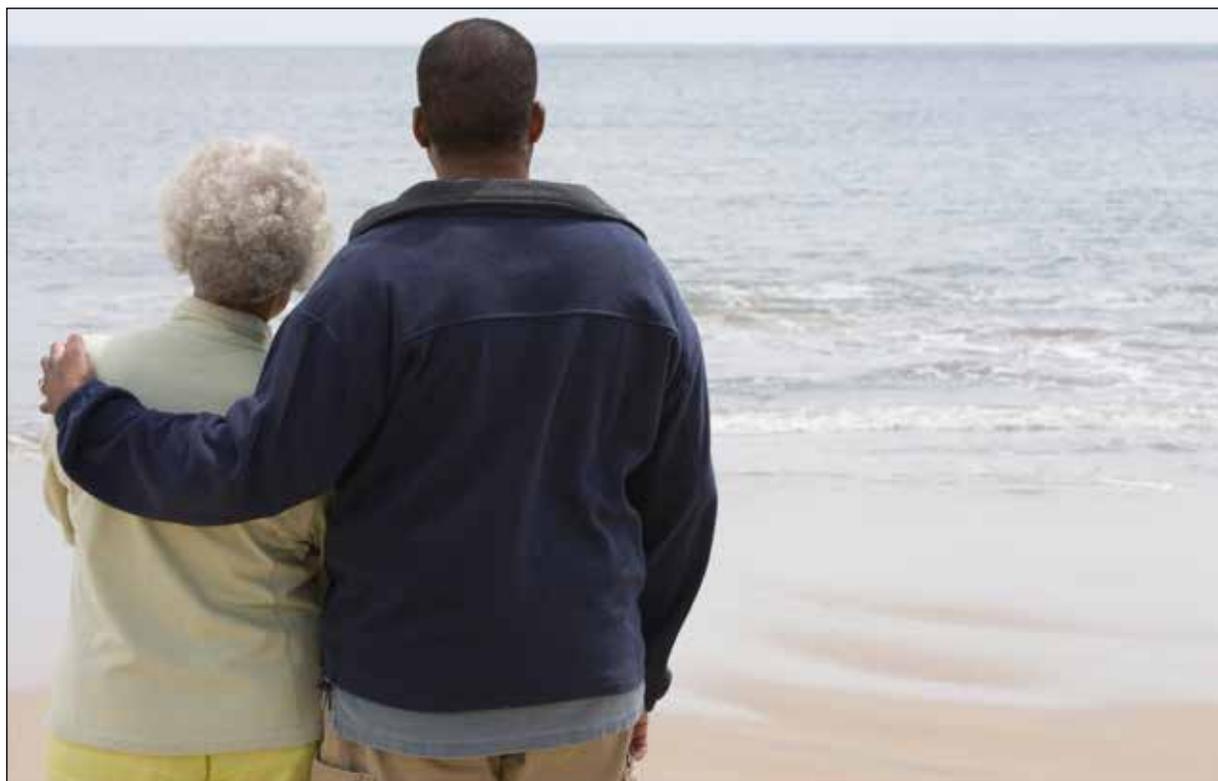
Loss of appetite, sleeplessness and profound sadness are expected symptoms of grief, but medical signs are common too, Belkin says.

"Stomach aches, gastrointestinal problems, headaches and even what appear to be true medical symptoms such as heart pain or shortness of breath may occur in some cases," Belkin says.

Combined, these symptoms can cause the survivor to require emergency treatment, he says.

"The more severe these symptoms present," Belkin says, "the more important it is to seek immediate medical evaluation."

Talk of personal mortality is normal and not necessarily worrisome for concerned loved ones,



Losing a spouse is a devastating life event. Take time to talk with whomever you'd like to support you when the time comes. Include your family members or trusted friends in your conversations, if appropriate.

Suddenly Alone: For the Surviving Spouse

Even if you have prepared yourself for your partner's death, it is normal to feel shock. This will be a busy time for you, so surround yourself with friends and family who can help you, especially in the early days and weeks. Our checklist may help you stay focused:

- Rely on loved ones and longtime friends. Be wary of "new friends" who offer financial or legal advice. Use only trusted professional advisors.

- Contact your spiritual advisor, if you have one. They are highly trained to support those who are grieving.

- Reach out to your spouse's hospice workers, if applicable.

- Be specific about your needs. Don't be afraid to ask for help with everyday errands such as laundry, house cleaning, meals and home repair. Create a list of jobs that

can be done for those who ask to help.

- Be sure to get estimates on funeral home services before agreeing to anything. Take a friend with you when meeting with prospective funeral homes.

- If your spouse was in the military, then he or she may be eligible for military funeral benefits. Contact Michigan's Department of Military and Veteran Affairs at 517.481.7900.

- Gather all necessary financial and legal documents. For a list, talk to your estate planner, visit the nonprofit Elder Law of Michigan Inc. or call them 866.400.9164.

- Visit Michigan Legal Aid's website to read "After the Loss of a Loved One" at michiganlegalaid.org/library_client/elder/after_the_loss_of_a_loved_one_legal_and_emotional_concerns/html_view

- If you don't obtain a death certificate from your funeral director, then you can get copies from the county clerk's office or from the State of Michigan Vital Records Office, michigan.gov.

- You may qualify for Social Security survivors' benefits. Download a copy of "Survivors Benefits" from The Social Security Administration from socialsecurity.gov/pubs/EN-05-10084.pdf.

- Your city's senior center may offer services such as transportation for errands or help with home repair or yard work.

- Stay healthy by maintaining a routine. Remember to eat and sleep as regularly as you can. If you weren't the one to cook, then accept offers of prepared meals or contact your Area Agency on Aging to register for a Meals on Wheels program, at least for a little while.

says David Monroe, Psy.D., D.Min., licensed professional counselor of Hope Counseling Center in Redford.

Actual threats of self-harm, however, are a red flag. “Intervention should be involved with that,” Monroe says.

Feelings Are Gender-Unique

Men and women do experience grief differently, Belkin says. While women express openly, men tend to internalize.

“Men commonly do not want to talk about their own pain, and their suffering turns inward, possibly resulting in physical symptoms and sometimes leading to the use of alcohol or drugs to dull the pain of the loss,” Belkin says, noting that men may need to seek out therapy more often than they actually do.

Loved ones can help by just sharing time with no pressure to talk about feelings, Monroe suggests.

“Play cards or golf and just spend time treating them normally,” he says.

Moving Forward

Experts say that remaining forward-focused helps usher in a new stage of life.

“Transforming grief into something positive

can be a way of seeing things differently rather than becoming jaded or pessimistic,” says Oakland County resident Kristin Meekhof, who talked with dozens of widows for her book, “A Widow’s Guide to Healing: Gentle Support and Advice for the First 5 Years,” and learned the value of healing through meaningful volunteer work or simple acts of kindness. “It doesn’t have to always be on a large scale.”

Mentoring, attending workshops and even sharing the name of a good accountant can help spin difficult times into more positive life experiences.

“The future will be here sooner than people expect,

and life will settle into a new type of normal,” Belkin says. “Focusing on the future gives one a goal; it’s essential to do.”

For the Adult Child: The Support Role

You want to support your mom or dad the best you can, but losing a parent is tough, so remember that you, too, are grieving and seek help if you need it. Here are our experts’ suggestions for coping:

- If your parent was providing care, then be prepared for possible subsequent illness as mom or dad recovers from this stressful role. Caregivers often get colds or flu as a result.

- Even with close family nearby, the recently



bereaved can experience intense loneliness, so continue to reach out longer than you think you may need to and brainstorm social experiences when your parent feels ready.

- The smallest decisions can be crippling, so make plans that require very few options. For example, pick a restaurant and tell your mom you’ll pick her up for lunch at noon, rather than asking what time will work for her.

- Consider the need for physical help with activities of daily living or medication management. Will family or a private duty caregiver provide this support?

- Discuss the value of an emergency care response system.

- Spend time talking about day-to-day finances and set up auto-pay for monthly bills, if appropriate.

- If you sense that your parent is reluctant to accept help or can’t quantify his or her needs, then offer some prompting questions. For example, “Can we take care of the lawn and garden for you?” or “Can I drive you to your doctor’s appointment next Tuesday?” Help your parent make a list of doable tasks for friends and family members who offer help.

- Be realistic about progress. Grief is a process, and we all manage on our own timeline.

- You may suspect your parent would benefit from therapy, but realize that this generation stigmatizes psychological care. Suggest “talking with someone” rather than “seeing a therapist” or enlist guidance from spiritual leaders; they are specially trained to help in times of loss.

- If you live far away, then find a local emergency contact for mom or dad. Consider working with a care management group such as ElderCare Solutions or Oakland Family Services; your Area Agency on Aging will have additional resources.

- Take time to talk with whoever you’d like to support you when the time comes. Include your family members or trusted friends in your conversations, if appropriate.

- Laughter can be healing. Don’t be afraid to recall funny family situations; this may be just the sunshine needed.

For the Couple: Conversations to Have Now

After the fact, there will be many things you’ll wish you had said, so prioritize time with your spouse to discuss practical issues. You’ll be glad you

did. Here are some topics to get you started:

- Talk about issues surrounding long-term care, including financial decisions. How would you pay for care should the need arise? Consult a trusted financial adviser to discuss asset preservation for the surviving spouse.

- Discuss end-of-life care. In the event, do you want to engage hospice services? Would you like heroic measures taken...or not?

- Share your desires regarding memorial services. If you wish for a family-directed event, then make plans sooner rather than later. Prepaid funeral service providers are regulated by the state of Michigan, but talk with your financial adviser about prepaying versus setting up an account earmarked for your funeral service.

- Together, collect all important documents – insurance policies, wills, advance directives, tax returns, bank account numbers, military discharge papers, marriage certificate, titles and more – and store them in a safe place.

- Consider drafting – or updating – your will and set up a trust for your assets, if appropriate. If you don’t have an attorney, then you can get a referral from the Michigan Elder Law Legal Hotline.

Additional Resources

- Widowed Friends, widowedfriends.org
- Elder Law of Michigan Inc., 866.400.9164, elderlawofmi.org
- ElderCare Solutions of Michigan, a program of Jewish Family Service, 248.592.1944, eldercaresolutionsofmi.org
- Oakland Family Services Older Adult and Caregiver Services, 248.858.7766, oaklandfamilyservices.org
- Area Agency on Aging, 248.357.2255 (Oakland County), 586.226.0309 (Macomb County), aaa1b.org
- Detroit Area Agency on Aging, 313.446.4444, detroitseniorsolution.com
- Macomb County Community Services Agency Office of Senior Services, 586.469.5228, mccsa.macombgov.org
- Wayne County Senior Services, 313.224.0810, waynecounty.com
- Oakland County Senior Services, 800.848.5533, oakgov.com