

The Loss of a Spouse

By Dr Bill Webster

A 50/50 chance, to any gambler, is a pretty good bet. But did you ever stop to think that if you are in a significant relationship, there is a 50/50 chance that you will eventually grieve the loss of your partner.

Listen to some of the stories of people who experienced the loss of a spouse.

I would go to work and it would seem that everything was the same as it had always been. But then I would come home. WOW! Just walking into that empty house. Nobody to say hello or ask me how I got on that day. No delicious aroma of supper in the oven. I had to make my own meal ... when I felt like it ... and most of the time I didn't ... because I was missing what I had lost ... not just my wife, but also the person who used to look after me. That was when it hit me hardest.

Michael

“The days that followed his death were both utterly full and completely empty ... full of activity yet empty of life. Much of the time I sleep walked through the things I had to do, so numb that I was often completely unaware of what was going on around me. I felt like Pinocchio must have felt inside of the whale ... cut off from everything that I thought was my life. Then an event or a few spoken words would bring me out of my darkness, only to find myself standing alone and confused on some strange and unfamiliar shore, full of feelings and memories, but also feeling utterly lost.

Robyn

She was not only my wife. She was also the one who would tell me if my socks matched; if my tie was straight, or if my hair was combed. She was able to tell me with one look if I was talking too much or saying something stupid. She was the one who would remember all the birthdays and special occasions, and all I had to do was sign cards. She was good at all the things I am not good at. So she complemented me and made me more whole. God, I miss her so much. I feel like part of me is missing.

Joe

A common theme among people who have lost their spouse is the debilitating effects of feeling entirely *alone* and *incomplete*. The sense of feeling like you have lost an essential part of yourself is both painful and disconcerting. The world suddenly looks like a different place, often odd and distanced. You are not sure how to cope with life in general, and sometimes you may even wonder if you even want to *try*.

One 68 year old widow said, “*There is no use trying because you can’t get anywhere anyway. I’m so tired all the time. Everything is too much effort.*”

Some of the most common feelings and concerns after the loss of a spouse are reflected in the following statements:

- I felt like I had lost my best friend
- I am angry
- I feel guilty that I didn’t do enough for him/her.
- I am afraid.
- I worry about lots of things, especially money
- Suddenly I feel very old
- I feel sick all the time
- I think about my own death more frequently
- I seem to be going through an identity crisis
- I feel relieved that his suffering is over, then immediately guilty for feeling that way.

Behind each of these statements is a feeling. To fully understand the effects that the loss of that spouse has on that survivor, we need to understand the dynamics behind each of these reactions. The feeling communicates what the person is missing and offers an opportunity to examine the deficiency and find ways to cope with these responses in a way which will ultimately facilitate healing.

First, it is essential to recognize that healing cannot take place unless you EXPRESS what you are feeling and thinking as a result of your loss. That which cannot be put into words, cannot be put to rest. This is where a support group can play such a vital role for grieving people. The opportunity to talk about the person, their life as well as their death, what you miss about them, your feelings of loneliness, anger and many others, and to review the final days of their life and your relationship.

Even when there is some ambivalence about certain aspects of the life shared, it is important to verbalize your anger or your regret about what you lost and never had, or about what could or should have been.

There are some very real consequences from not expressing feelings. Studies clearly show that mortality rates are higher among those who do not articulate their grief, and this may also account for the much higher rate of males who die within a year of their spouse, due to the societal norms that make it more difficult for men to express emotions.

Some survivors ask, “How long should I talk about this? What is normal?” This concern is often motivated by the fact that within a few weeks or months of the death, others seem reluctant to talk about it. After all, their life has returned to normal. But the widow or widower needs to talk about it, because it just feels unbelievable. Life will never be “normal” again (even though a new definition of normality will be established eventually). So some grieving people need to talk for six months, but for others it can be two years or longer. Everyone needs and deserves to follow their own time line.

Over the years, I have noted FOUR situations particularly affecting grieving spouses that require an inordinate amount of personal courage:

1. Coping with persistent unpleasant memories
2. Avoiding certain rooms or situations in the house
3. Experiencing hallucinations where the dead spouse is seen or heard
4. Dealing with their spouse’s personal effects (clothes, tools, etc.)

Unpleasant memories most often relate to the painful images surrounding the death, and the frustration of not being able to “do” anything to change the outcome. Often through a life-threatening illness, a relationship will peak in one direction or another ... a good relationship will tend to get better, a poor relationship will tend to get worse ... although there are glorious exceptions. This intensity of the relationship prior to the death magnifies the loss, either by the person missing all the things done and shared through the illness, or by feelings of regret that they did not do enough. Often the inability of the survivor to “let go” of the image of the person in the present is connected to one or other of these factors.

If the person is avoiding sleeping in their own bed, or steering clear of certain areas of the house, this behavior should not be considered unusual or pathological. They are merely protecting themselves from stress. There is a reason for every behavior and perhaps that location is a too painful reminder of the death, or expresses a concern as to “how will I manage”.

Hallucinations (or however we choose to define these experiences) have a wide range of “explanations”. Is it a “visitation of the person’s spirit”, or is it a “product of sensory recall”. I try not to attempt to explain what it may or may not be, but rather to ask how the survivor *felt* after the experience. And almost always, the person feels reassured, relieved, comforted. If that is the effect, it hardly matters whether it is a dream, a hallucination or a visitation, and to argue that seems to me to miss the point.

Dealing with a spouse’s personal effects is something many survivors procrastinate over. Sometimes this has to do with an understandably low physical energy and emotional stamina. Because these are “special things” you may not know who to give them to or what to do with them. That is OK.

Do nothing until you are SURE that you feel comfortable with what will happen, even if that takes several months or longer. But when you do decide, ask a friend or family member to assist, or even just to be there and talk to you while you do it. Maybe there will be things that you simply do not want to discard or give away so keep them. Remember, it doesn’t hurt anyone or anything to leave your spouse’s things right where they are. Don’t allow anyone to force you into dealing with things until you are ready, sure and comfortable.

Next time, in the second half of this article, we will look at some of the challenges of rebuilding one’s life after the Loss of a Spouse.