



## **Coping With the Loss of a Partner**

*When Angela died, I was overwhelmed. I missed her. I was hurt, angry and sorry it wasn't me. I thought I'd never feel better, and I didn't know what to do.*

The loss of a spouse or partner is one of the most intense personal crises a human being can face. After the initial numbness, you may experience feelings such as disappointment, anger, denial and pain. In addition to your own feelings, you have to attend to your children's feelings, legal arrangements, finances and employment issues. It is common to feel overwhelmed and unsure about the future. The best thing to do is to talk with close friends or family members and let yourself mourn.

Mourning is not considered as important in our culture as it is in other cultures. There are few customs in our society to help people through mourning. You may feel you're expected to get over your loss before you're ready. In addition, demands on your time and energy, because of changing roles and responsibilities, may leave you feeling drained.

Your ability to cope at this time may also be affected by the circumstances surrounding the death and your perception of the loss. For example, was the loss due to an extended illness, suicide or a sudden accident? Do you feel your spouse's death could have been prevented or not? Do you believe your partner suffered or was in physical or emotional pain when he or she died? The answers to these questions can influence how quickly or slowly it takes you to resolve the loss of your loved one.

### **Working Through Feelings**

Sometimes the pain is so intense you may be frightened. Will you ever be able to survive? It's important to know that this pain is part of the healing process, and it will take time to heal. If you fell down and broke your leg, you wouldn't question asking for help. You would take it easy so the bone could heal. It will also take time and support from friends and family to recover from your loss. Other people have found this information helpful to keep in mind.

- As time goes by, the pain will ease.
- To move on, you will need to find a new purpose and a way to keep your partner close in your memory.
- It may help to share your feelings with a friend, relative or counselor. Don't be afraid to ask for help.
- Sometimes it helps to find a support group.
- Take care of yourself. If you feel you are coming apart, are no longer in control, are about to take action you may later regret; if you think about turning to alcohol, drugs or other addictive substances; or if you feel isolated, get the help you deserve. Look in the phone book under community services and call someone who can help you.

**It Used to Be *Us*. Now it's Just *Me*.**

Most people go through similar mourning stages, but not in the same way or the same order. Which of these experiences seem familiar to you? How do your feelings differ? Are you taking time to sort out your feelings and to talk with friends, relatives or a counselor?

### **Shock and Disorganization**

*I wasn't sure how to act. My daily life was turned upside down. I felt I had to take care of everything, but I didn't want to do anything.*

### **Denial**

Some people may deny their loss by avoiding change. *I would spend time thinking that this really didn't happen and that I would wake up tomorrow and life would be back to normal. I couldn't even sleep alone in our bed.*

### **Anger**

If anger is not expressed, it can become destructive. It may lead to depression, ulcers, high blood pressure or other problems. Be careful not to take your anger out on the children. Remember, anger can be expressed in healthy ways. Try to find positive changes like making exercise a part of your life, or starting new hobbies or activities. *A friend and I started walking together at first to just get me out of the house. But now, I really look forward to these walks and our conversations. It helps to talk about what I've been feeling.*

### **Loneliness**

*After things calmed down, I was managing better, but I still felt lonely. There was no adult around to talk about the changes, or to help me make decisions.* Sometimes dinnertime or times when you did activities together are difficult. Reach out and create new traditions. For example, share dinner every Thursday with a friend and her family, or go to the park every Saturday with a neighbor and his children.

### **Guilt and Shame**

*I felt like people looked at me differently. I wondered why my wife had to die and not me. Sometimes I feel guilty—like I should have done more to save her.*

### **Other Feelings May Include:**

**Sorrow:** *I still feel sad when I think about what he is missing. It's hard to let go of the future we had planned together.*

**Depression, loss of interest in life:** *I feel depressed, sometimes I feel like my life isn't worth living without her.*

**Test of religious beliefs:** *How could a higher being let this happen?*

**Focus on the person who has died:** *Why did he have to die? There wasn't a more giving or caring person.*

**Anxiety about the future:** *I don't know what I'm going to do. How can I take care of the kids and myself alone? I don't know what the future holds.*

### **What Areas Challenge You Most?**

Look at the following list. Check the areas which are or may be the greatest challenge for you.

- Legal issues: insurance, child custody
- Change in physical environment: where you live, where your child will go to school
- Financial: property, budget
- Relationships with extended family
- Relationships with friends
- Need to create new social activities
- Change of personal identity: self image must shift from being a couple, *we*, to a single, *me*
- Getting through grief or depression
- Returning to work

Your adjustment in these areas will depend on your own personality, your beliefs about death, and your need to control events in your life. After thinking about these areas, think about where you can turn for help. It is sometimes hard to ask for help, but it will benefit your whole family.

### **Ways to Help Cope**

Although it will take time and you will experience many different emotions, there are things that you can do to help yourself. Remember you are vulnerable after the loss of a loved one. It is important to stay healthy, both physically and emotionally. Check some ways you will cope with your loss. Add other ways if you can think of some.

- Stay connected to your friends.
- Be patient with yourself and your children.
- Take care of yourself. Get plenty of rest.
- Read. Learn something new.
- Eat healthy foods. Start a plan to eat balanced meals.
- Tell and show your children you love them.
- Start a new hobby or activity with your children.
- Exercise. Go for a 20-minute walk every day. Explore many exercise alternatives.
- Don't take on extra responsibilities.

Source: Temke, M., Walsh, W., Carman, Douglas, E. (Updated 2006, May). *Loss of a partner*. Retrieved June 28, 2009 from the University of New Hampshire website: <http://extension.unh.edu>

### **Pathways to Well Being**

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