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When Your Spouse Dies: Ways to Cope

By Ina Hillebrandt

“My husband went into the kitchen. He had been sitting in the living room just as happy as he could be. I heard him laugh. Then I heard a strange noise, and I went in and found him dead. I was in complete shock. I think I went through every emotion there is: I felt despair; I felt like I had been cheated and robbed; I hated people for having their husbands when mine was gone. And I wouldn’t believe it. I used to go out and look inside the car to see if he was coming back. I took his bathrobe and slept in it. I went berserk for a long time – five years.”

“You lost your partner; you lost your other hand.”

These statements come from interviews and support groups I conducted for TIAA-CREF with more than 100 widows and widowers across the country during the late 1980s. But the feelings they expressed would be timely in any decade. Whether the death was sudden or followed a long illness, the pain of loss was initially intense. Many whose husband or wife had died as long as 20 years earlier had never spoken about it. They gave a variety of reasons: *“I didn’t want to burden anyone.” “No one else could understand what I was going through.” “You just have to go on.” and “What good would it do?”* Sound familiar?

If you haven’t been able to talk about your grief yet, the idea of voicing it may seem overwhelming, as if you’ll become paralyzed, engulfed by pain. But the people in TIAA-CREF’s groups showed considerable relief once they began to open up. Much to their surprise, they actually laughed, and many concluded, *“I feel so much better!”*

Experience and research with losses, including my own – my husband, father, brother, mother, almost every aunt and uncle and cherished pets – make one point crystal clear; Not talking about the death of someone close hurts incredibly more than expressing one’s feelings about it. My motto has become:

- First, get the pain out. Then you can move on, and build a full life for yourself again. How do you begin, or release more, if you’ve already found ways to get some of the grief out?
- Talk with others about your loss.
- Keep a journal: write out your feelings.
- Find meaningful activities.
- Create balance in your days.



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Following is a selection of specific tools I found helpful; you may, too.

Handling Guilt, Anger and Resentment

“I hated him. I hated my husband for dying.”

“You know, I still get mad at him. It’s been two years, and I still think, ‘How could you have left me like this?’ He used to do everything – drive, do the bills. Now I have to take care of it all!” (This from a very active, independent woman, who was only partly joking.)

Accept that most of us feel this anger and resentment. It’s an important step in healing. We joke, but often we really are angry when someone close “deserts” use.

“Are you kidding? I went to the cemetery with my son and you could have taken me off to a mental institution. I yelled at everyone there, ‘How dare they do this to me!’ But I felt better.”

Know that guilt stalks almost all survivors – *“If only I’d done this or that.”*

Some of the best advice I ever got was from my brother’s doctor: *“He will die, and it may be just after a shot of the morphine (we were administering at home), because ultimately that will stop his breathing. But remember, it was the disease that killed him, not you.”*

Talking With Others

- **Find a support group in your area.** Try different ones if the first doesn’t fit. Give the process a chance. Once you find one where you feel comfortable, you will begin to find peace and release – even fun (no kidding). These are people who’ve gone through the same experience. They understand; you are not burdening them. On the contrary, everyone in the room derives support from hearing others’ experiences, and if they can offer a word of advice to a newcomer, it gives them satisfaction.
- **Turn to your family.** *“When nighttime comes, I miss my wife the most. If I go into any kind of dive or depression, I phone one of my brothers or sisters and have a protracted conversation, and it seems to help.”*
- **Or don’t turn to your family!** *“I think if you hang around with only your family and old friends, you’re making a big mistake, because all you’re doing is going*



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over and over everything . . . I don't want that. I'm enjoying life now with new friends . . . often younger. I tell them things about the Depression, educate them . . . and they are interested in me as a new friend."

- **Try "Telephone Therapy"** (a term used by 12-step programs). Make a list of phone numbers of people you feel safe opening up to. When you're feeling blue, make a call. You help the person you call as much as he or she may help you.
- **Consider psychotherapy**; it can be extremely valuable. Both men and women said they had gone to licensed mental health professionals and found the experience very helpful in getting through the time of adjusting to the loss of their husband or wife. Me, too.
- **Talk to a pet!** Get one if you don't already have one; it's marvelous therapy. *"There's research proving people live longer when they have a pet."*

"I love my cat. She was with me when my husband died. She listens, purrs, makes me laugh and gives me a lot of comfort."

Writing, a wonderful release mechanism

- Write whatever comes up for you about your spouse. You might begin with the actual happenings at the time of death. Try to get into how you were feeling, what you went through. Think about where you were, whom you talked to, what helped, what might have hindered. Just get it down in writing, and see how you feel afterward. Or start with any writing, and see how you feel afterward. Or start with any memory, one not so loaded. Just let it flow.

One man had problems communicating with his children after his wife's death. It's not unusual to have conflicts with family members after a death. He took me up on writing how he would like a conversation to go with one of the children. This spurred many actual conversations and the beginning of a family healing.

You can also use this technique to **"converse" with your spouse**. Often there are unresolved issues, particularly when the death is sudden.

Engaging in Activities

Some of the following actions can lead you to meet people who share your interests, broaden your circle of friends and bring you happiness through social activities:

- **Visit the ocean.** The ocean is a powerful "spirit healer." Scientists tell us it emits negative ions, which make us feel better. (Should be positive ions, eh? Go figure.)



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- **Go to a lake, pond, stream, river or waterfall.** All water helps soothe the psyche.
- **Enroll in a class.** Maybe you'd like to finally try your hand at piano lessons, flugelhorn or drum. It'll open your mind, keep you active – nourish you. And who knows whom you might meet?
- **Volunteer.** Many groups really need your help! Or consider going back to work if you're not working, even if you don't need the money. Get your mind going, and feel you're contributing to the community and to your own well-being.
- **Exercise regularly.** It stimulates endorphins, which lift the mood. And of course, exercise keeps you in shape. It also sends oxygen to the brain, and we could all use more of that. (I forget why.)

Creating Balance

Do you run around all day to keep from feeling any pain, or perhaps stay alone, not wanting to inflict yourself on anyone (or vice versa)? One centenarian, a lively role model, said, "Honey, I don't have any secret. I just go. If you sit home all the time, you just feel sorry for yourself." Another woman I worked with said, "I can't stay home. I have to keep running. I wish I could just sit." Finding a way to balance each day is challenging, but extremely rewarding.

If you haven't done so, **give yourself time to grieve alone every day.** It won't swallow you up if you provide for yourself in nurturing ways. Instead, you will find yourself feeling some relief and renewed energy. Do this for as long as you feel the need. For me, it's been about 15 to 30 minutes at a time, with a notebook to jot my thoughts, and coffee, plus a doggie and pussycats by my side, followed by a walk with more feelings churning. The process continued for a week, but again, there are no rules. I just stopped when I felt I didn't have to do it anymore, or "complete."

- **Schedule a get-together** with one or more people daily or weekly. If evenings are hard for you, arrange for company at lunch.
- **Be sure to eat nourishing foods.** Make the effort; take the time. Often we don't feel like eating properly when we've lost someone. Sometimes the feelings spring from guilt – if he or she is not here, how can I deserve to eat well? But remember, you can't help the person who has died by depriving yourself. The person you lost wouldn't have wanted that.



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- **Partner with your doctor to monitor your health.** Ask your doctor or a psychiatrist about an antidepressant drug if feelings of depression deepen, and you have trouble functioning (you stop eating or have persistent sleep disturbance, for example).
- **At bedtime, try writing down five things to be grateful for.** These can be tiny moments in the day. For example, the feel of wind in your hair, the sight of a sunset, a scene from a movie. Note how you feel as you're writing and then at the end of the process.
- **Any time of the day you catch yourself feeling down, and would like to lighten up, consider:** "Most folks are as happy as they make up their minds to be." – Abraham Lincoln. ■

About the author: Ina Hillebrandt is an author and Fortune 500 consultant. Her *UN-Workshops* focus on emerging from grief, eliciting creativity and spotting humor. Her book, *Pawprints* ©1999, is a collection of small "tails" for people with a heart for animals.

Reading Suggestions

After the Death of a Loved One (from TIAA-CREF). Losing a family member or friend is one of life's hardest blows. Yet even during the emotional turmoil that follows someone's death, there are important, sometimes urgent, decisions to make. For more information, call 800 842-2776 to receive a free copy.

Grief Expressed: When a Mate Dies, by Marta Felber

Write from Your Heart, Healing Grief Journal, by Katherine Peterson

Widow to Widow: Thoughtful, Practical Ideas for Rebuilding Your life, by Genevieve Davis Ginsburg

A Grief Observed, by C.S. Lewis

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