

## GOING ON ALONE

If there's one thing that Americans past middle age fear almost as much as death, it's widowhood. And with good reason. Ours is a culture that does not make it easy to enjoy old age alone.

Fortunately, you don't need to journey alone. The world offers a good deal of help these days. Most of us have been taught to handle our problems ourselves. What stops us often from reaching out to others is a false sense of pride—not wanting to impose ourselves. If you have the motivation to improve the quality of your life when your mourning period is over, you will not be shy about turning to sources for self-renewal.

Take, for instance, the attitude of my recently widowed friend, Marge: "I've learned that *I* have control over my loneliness. I don't need to stay home in front of the television set on a Saturday night, sulk and eat potato chips if I don't feel like it. I can plan something early in the week."

### UNIQUE OPPORTUNITIES

According to clinical psychologist Dr. Julia Spears, living alone can provide a unique opportunity to develop resources that you otherwise would not have had. The cornerstone of being able to relate to others in healthy ways is being able to get along with yourself. It's important to have the skill of respecting yourself, enjoying your own company and being able to entertain yourself.

Often, widowed people are not willing to face being alone because they are not ready to accept the fact that they can change their lifestyle. They feel they ought to be able to go on exactly as before. This can be a big stumbling block in overcoming loneliness.

Another obstacle, says Dr. Spears, is the "social pressures to be connected to other people in living arrangements. Often, people feel ashamed of themselves for being alone. This is paradoxical because there are more people today living alone than with others."

Some Spears suggestions for newly widowed persons:

- Allow yourself an adequate mourning period, one with which you're comfortable.
- Talk about your feelings to friends and family as soon as you can. If they do not wish to do so, join a widow's support group or seek individual counseling. Sometimes, a support group will also make counseling available.
- Seek professional help if there's an aspect of your life that you cannot handle, whether it's legal, financial or domestic. You may need to hire a housekeeper temporarily, until you can learn to run the household yourself.
- Take in a pet for companionship and for some order in your life. An animal will provide you with a schedule you can't neglect.
- Find a volunteer job that involves you with people. Contact an employment agency which places older people or become a foster grandparent as a way to get on a schedule which you're obliged to keep.
- Maintain your regular eating routine. Not taking the time to shop and to prepare wholesome meals when you can't dine out can deprive you of essential nutrients, especially at a time when you're under stress.
- Engage in physical activity to release emotional and physical tension. Studies show that exercise like walking or running can dispel depression.
- Keep up with the activities and routines that you did with your spouse if those still make you feel good. Feel free to develop new ones that won't constantly remind you of your loss. A frequent phenomenon is that the survivor begins to engage in a practice which never interested him or her but which the spouse loved. It's a way of incorporating the person who died and keeping that person's spirit alive.

My friend Marge became quite adept at making friends of both sexes. Since there was no support group in her neighborhood, she started her own. "I found I wasn't alone in my feelings," she says. "Others were frightened, angry and confused, too. I learned to reach out to them, and they reached out to me. They became my family. I love and trust them. Through sharing our worries as well as our triumphs, I feel better. Don't be ashamed if you feel panicked at being alone. You need people around you!"

Taken from an article by Dusty Sklar, "The Retired Officer," February 1985