

WIDOWHOOD THE PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAPS HOW TO DEAL WITH THEM

Loss of a spouse is considered one of life's most stressful experiences. And this is especially true for women, who are not always encouraged to develop financial and emotional independence when their spouses are alive.

As a result, widows must deal with normal grief and loneliness—and they may also have frightening doubts about financial security...and their ability to function on their own.

However, once these issues are dealt with successfully, widowhood can actually mark the beginning of a highly rewarding and satisfying chapter of a woman's life.

Key: Learn to see widowhood not as the *end* of your life but as a time to achieve personal goals that you had previously neglected.

THE GRIEF PROCESS

Mourning a loved one is an intensely painful process, but it *is* a process.

The pain eventually recedes, making room for a new, satisfying way of life. *The grief process includes the following stages:*

Shock. Initial reactions may involve numbness and disbelief as well as overwhelming sadness.

Emotional expression. Once the initial paralysis has worn off, the bereaved person may need to cry for hours on end or talk about the loss to whomever will listen.

Acceptance/adjustment. The widow begins to face the fact that her husband is no longer in her life. She reassesses her personal goals and values, and starts to think about the changes she needs to make now that she is on her own.

Rebuilding. She slowly begins to nourish new interests and friendships...and to realize that life can still be enjoyable and fulfilling.

THE GRIEVING TRAPS

From personal experience and my psychology practice, I've concluded that mourning takes at least four seasons. *Problem:* Each season brings up memories that can temporarily intensify the sense of loss.

However, some people become stuck at one or more points in the grief process. They may be paralyzed by overwhelming emotions or unable to carry out basic activities—such as buying groceries or paying the bills—weeks or months after the loss. You may be stuck in grief if, several months after your husband's death, you notice any of the following:

- Continued weight loss.
- Sleep problems.
- Chronic feelings of fear or desperation,
- Inability to stay alone.
- Reversion to a childish state. A younger widow may move back in with her parents—and may not want to leave.
- Inability to make decisions—or making a series of bad decisions—because concentration is too difficult.
- Unwillingness to talk about anything but the loss.

If you're having trouble moving through the grief process, seek help. One of the best sources is a support group for widows, which you can locate through your church or synagogue or organizations such as the American Association of Retired Persons.

Not everyone is a joiner. If you're more comfortable with one-to-one support, you may want to consider grief counseling with a psychologist, social worker, minister or rabbi. Make sure this person has specific training and experience in dealing with issues of loss as well as women's issues.

OTHER EMOTIONAL ISSUES

Guilt. If a spouse died from an illness or accident, the widow may feel guilty about being spared. Some women may be troubled by the feeling that they should have done more for their husbands while they were still alive. Feelings of disloyalty often arise when a widow attempts to move out of mourning and into new friendships.

Another kind of guilt may strike a woman whose marriage was unhappy or unsatisfying...especially if her reaction to her husband's death was more relief than sadness.

Like unchanging grief, being stuck in guilt is a problem that may require professional counseling. Guilt never accomplishes anything—but it can be hard to identify and work through on your own.

Fear of imposing. During the month after the death, you'll probably be surrounded by neighbors, friends and family who visit and bring food and support.

You'll need their help just as much later on, but they may be less likely to come around on their own...not because they don't care, but because there are fewer prescribed roles for them to follow.

Most people want to help but don't know how. Don't be afraid to let family, friends and neighbors know when you need companionship, an ear to listen to you, a ride or any other kind of support.

Making new friends. Obviously, you shouldn't give up your old friends. But moving beyond your existing circle and bringing new people into your life is desirable. The combination of new people and familiar ones is important to your recovery.

Good ways to meet interesting people include support groups, volunteer work, classes at a community college or "Y," and during sports and other physical activities (such as tennis, yoga, aerobics).

I've been referring to female friends, but dating is another way of looking forward. You shouldn't feel pressured to date...but it's also not healthy to *avoid* dating simply out of fear or loyalty to your late husband. Your husband isn't here now—you are...and you need to move on. Besides, dating doesn't imply a commitment. It can be a way of enriching your life by getting to know a variety of interesting new people.

Important: Don't get pushed into sexual contact if you're not ready. When you are ready, remember that times have changes...learn about—and practice—safe sex.

Dr. Mary R. Donahue, "The Bottom Line,"
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