

# After Losing Your Significant Other

*“It was very, very hard to go out and come back to my house when the sun was going down. That was the hardest thing to handle . . . Coming back to that empty house.”*

*“I’m just getting through the days one at a time the best I can. We were together for thirty-eight years; it’s like part of me is missing.”*

It is common to feel alone and incomplete after the death of a significant other. This sense of having lost an essential part of yourself is painful and disorienting. The immediate world often seems odd and distanced. Without the person who would normally help you cope with hard times, you are not sure how to cope with life in general. Sometimes you may not be sure you want to try.

During the period immediately following a partner’s death, many experience a depressed mood, prolonged and excessive crying, and insomnia. As sadness, despair, and exhaustion pervade your daily life, you may also feel a futility that affects you physically and emotionally.

Survivors react to the loss of a significant other in innumerable ways. Your own feelings and concerns are influenced by your personality, your unique characteristics, the nature of your relationship, the duration of your relationship, the cause of your loved one’s death, previous losses you have endured, and your age and gender.

## **Feelings and Concerns Following the Death**

*I feel as if I have lost my best friend.* The death of a significant other is a loss that has many components: the loss of a companion with whom you shared activities; you had a language that was familiar and shared by each other; you received daily affection to which you may have become so accustomed, you didn’t miss it until it was gone; and you were the recipient of the kind of loyalty that is provided by a best friend—one of a trusted supporter who had your back, explained you to others, and served as your active defender.

*I am angry.* When someone you trust, interact with, and depend on has left you alone, it is natural for you to feel abandoned. It is unfortunately common to trick yourself into believing they died on purpose, furthering the pain of loneliness.

*I feel guilty about something (or many things) I did, or didn't do.* You may feel guilty about being too quick to criticize, about being disloyal, about not earning enough, or about being a poor listener. We find so many things to feel guilty about. Regardless of the reason for the guilt, every guilt arises from one of two premises: 1) that you would have made your partner's life *happier* if you had done a certain thing, or 2) that if you had not done one thing, another thing would not have occurred; that is, if you had done or not done something they *would not have died*. Many assumptions are based on the belief that your actions would have made all the difference. This belief leads to the issue of personal control. By feeling guilty you are making yourself believe that you had control over the death. Having the conviction that makes you feel guilty is preferable to accepting the fact that death is beyond your control.

*Now I think about my own death more frequently.* Because your significant other's life ended against your will, you realize that your own life can do the same. Your mortality is underscored, and your death may seem to be approaching rapidly. Even though your death is not any more imminent than it ever was, you may find yourself thinking about it more than ever.

*I feel sick all the time.* Insomnia, extreme tiredness, lack of appetite, headaches, indigestion, chest pains, and heart palpitations are many of the symptoms reported by survivors. When your general health changes, it is natural that your capacity to care for yourself is reduced, making it more difficult to carry on with chores or a standard work routine. In this sense, your perception of self-worth becomes suddenly and drastically changed. So the problem of poor health ultimately affects all aspects of life—psychological, emotional, social, and mental.

*I am afraid.* Fear may be a strong reaction during the first few months after the death of a partner. You may fear taking care of yourself, or fear a different view of the future. You may fear shopping alone, driving by yourself, or sleeping in your house alone.

*I worry about money.* More often than not, financial matters are not in order when a loved one dies. And if the person who died has been the financial planner and money manager, the survivor may not be aware of the location, amount, and distribution of resources. Even if financial matters have been attended to, they may be shockingly insufficient. Additionally, from the survivor's point of view, property may be inequitably or irrationally distributed among other survivors. Financial complications or insufficient resources can produce a variety of reactions, including anxiety, fear, shame, and anger. For some, emotional energy can be completely consumed by the economics of survival.

*I'm going through an identity crisis.* Without a significant other's presence, the survivor is no longer part of a "couple." He or she is a single individual who now reminds others that their own "couple-ness" may be in jeopardy. The presence of this survivor without their loved one is a visual reminder that one half of a couple is now missing. As a result, you may experience a new kind of loneliness that comes from being excluded from dinner parties, bridge nights, tennis games, or group camping trips. You may feel different around your couple friends, finding it emotionally easier to interact with new people or those friends who didn't know your significant other.

*I feel relieved after the death.* Survivors may experience relief if their partner was terminally ill and experiencing great distress; if their loved one was an accident victim whose injuries had reduced life to nothing more than existence; if the deceased partner was abused; or if their significant other was suffering from chronic addiction. A feeling of relief is not easily admitted and is difficult to bear because it brings with it the burden of guilt.

### **How to Cope with Your Loss**

It is imperative to recognize that healing cannot take place if you do not express what you are feeling and thinking. Both positive and negative responses need to be shared. You will benefit by talking of your loneliness. Allow yourself to talk about the type of person your significant other was, about things they did and said, and about the activities, interests, qualities, and opinions the two of you shared. You may feel ambivalence about some aspect of your life together. You may want to vent your anger.

*I thought I knew how to handle it. I knew I was going to go through anger. I knew I was going to go through periods of being vulnerable. Even though I intellectualized it, I still had to go through it and experience it. I made myself physically sick because I wasn't letting my feelings out.*

While expressions of grief are of equal importance, societal expectations make it more difficult for men to discuss or convey feelings or concerns. Unfortunately, very real consequences emerge from not expressing feelings. Studies have shown the mortality rate is higher among those who do not express their grief. Some survivors ask, "How long will I want to talk about this? What is normal?" The answer is that you may want to talk about your loss for a very long time. Talk about it as long as you like and as much as you like. Stop only when you don't want to talk anymore. For some people, this will be six months. For others, it will be two years or longer.

Identify an appropriate listener—someone who is nonjudgmental, accepting, able to hear the bad as well as the good, and is not afraid of anger. A listener who is not helpful is someone who says that talking "doesn't do any good," that you should "be strong," and urges you to think of others who are worse off or to "focus on tomorrow."

Adapted from original post on *Beyond Grief* by Carol Staudacher.

*If you have questions or concerns about the grieving process,  
please give us a call at (716) 836-6460 or email [griefsupport@palliativecare.org](mailto:griefsupport@palliativecare.org)  
for more information, resource and support.*

Affiliate of Hospice & Palliative Care Buffalo  
150 Bennett Road, Buffalo, New York 14227-1480 • (716) 836-6460 • [www.WilsonSupportCenter.org](http://www.WilsonSupportCenter.org)