

Loss of Spouse ~ On Dealing with Loneliness

Loneliness, like all emotions, may mean one thing to someone, and quite a different thing to someone else. It is felt in a matter of degrees; some of us feel it acutely and others may experience it only fleetingly. Keeping this in mind, it is important to note that there is no right or wrong way to handle loneliness. We must let these feelings run their natural course, a course which is as variable as our differing personalities and backgrounds.

It is not merely the physical absence of your spouse that makes you lonely. Many apparently happily married people speak of periods of loneliness within marriage. People who are isolated from their families or people who have few friends often feel lonely. But for the widowed it is the permanence of this absence that can make this brand of loneliness so difficult to endure.

Unlike any other relationship, your spouse is your companion, your partner in life. Your children may move away, your friends may also; but your spouse does not. This is the one person you can count on, plan and share with. Two by two; it seems the world is ordered this way. When you've been 'two' and you suddenly become 'one', it's as if your very identity changes. "Kathy and Mike" becomes Kathy...without Mike. Your entire life changes. People will never treat you quite the same again once you've lost your spouse. Your identity has altered, the world sees you differently.

There is simple loneliness; no one to share a meal with. Holiday festivities that seem bleak with no one to buy for, celebrate with. This is a quiet, dull ache, a time for appropriately felt self-pity. Fortunately, this sort of loneliness can be held at bay (not easily, mind you!). This type of loneliness often responds to simple diversion. Keep yourself busy, distract your attention away from the immediate problem. Invite someone to share a meal; read a book, go to a movie. I once knew a very wise, very brave lady who died of cancer after a long struggle. She said that one of the things that helped her cope with the pain was to get totally absorbed in a book. She said that she couldn't feel her pain when her mind was focused elsewhere. Dealing with any pain takes courage, and sometimes just plain good sense.

There is the panic-tinged loneliness when misfortune strikes and we must face a crisis alone. It is just plain scary to be alone when a mishap or tragedy occurs. Facing legal ordeals or financial upheavals (which often accompany the death of a spouse) alone serves as a poignant reminder that your source of strength has been lessened by one half. You can't lean on anyone the way you can on a spouse. In your time of specific, urgent need, you feel that much more alone without your spouse.

If you are a parent, there is the loneliness you'll feel when a milestone passes in your child's life and your spouse is not there to share the occasion. You brought this child into the world together – it feels so wrong that there should not be both parents to witness the joys and sorrows of their development. If your children are young when a spouse dies there is the awful loneliness felt when pivotal decisions must be made alone. 'Am I making the right choices for my child? If only you had the feedback of your spouse to lend some judgement, some balance. Carrying the burden as a single parent can only intensify feelings of loneliness because of the constant reminder of the enormous responsibilities you must now face alone. If you are in this situation, it is vital that you seek outside help. A relative or friend of the opposite sex can help give your children support and serve as a role model. Keep the children's lives as normal as possible; participation in sports, for example, can give children structure and security. This can also serve to lessen your fears of carrying the load completely alone.

Sometimes we feel lonely even in the midst of a crowd. It is common to feel that 'no one understands how I feel'. No matter how sympathetic a listener may be, we may feel isolated and deserted; they just don't understand. But think about that for a moment; everyone feels that way. Everyone feels adrift and alone from time to time. How can we expect anyone to exactly grasp the full depth and scope of our feelings in period of extreme anguish? Grief and sadness and loneliness are a part of life. Everyone will have to experience some degree of these emotions sooner or later. Remember this and have patience with the rest of humanity, and know that sympathy is just as appropriate a response as 'understanding'. You can't walk in anyone else's shoes, not really. And no one can walk in yours. Be grateful for heartfelt sympathy and understand that your experience of grief and loneliness makes you better able to understand the problem of others.

When your spouse dies you may feel you've lost your future. Hopes, plans and dreams may offer little pleasure. You were building a life together. Without your spouse there seems little point to all that hard work. Yet after the worst of the pain and shock eases, you may find that fulfilling plans made with your spouse is a way of keeping him closer. To see that addition built on the house, or that vegetable garden planted, or that trip taken, can be a continuation of your life together. Your spouse lives on in the achievements you make based upon those shared dreams. Know the delight he or she would have felt in those promises fulfilled. Life is a continuum. We carry on with what has come before. What you accomplish alone later will always be a reflection of the dreams you had together.

Perhaps the hardest form of loneliness comes in those quiet moments when you think of something to say to your spouse and you are gripped with the reality that you can never share another conversation with him/her. Never hear their opinion, their reaction, their observation, their advice. It is the permanence of the situation that hits so hard in these moments. This loneliness is so filled with sadness for that which we cannot change or



understand. Since we cannot change what life has dealt, it helps to recall the Serenity Prayer. God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.