



FUNERAL CHAPEL

Dedicated To Those We Serve

# *Caring Connections:*

## *The Loss of a Spouse*

### *Part 2*

In my last article, I wrote about some of the unique challenges surrounding the loss of a spouse. In this second part, we will look at how the individual must convert the mourning process into a nurturing process as they seek to rebuild and reorganize a life where they feel like a half of them is missing.

I believe that an often overlooked aspect of losing a spouse is the change in identity the survivor experiences. We tend to define ourselves by our relationships, our work, our activities and involvements. Many couples define themselves as just that ... a couple. It is no ME, it is WE. Admittedly the degree of change will be determined by the complexity of the relationship. But we really cannot understand what any person has lost until we understand the relationship that we shared and is now lost.

What is missing from that relationship is really what the person is grieving. And, obviously, every single relationship is unique, with different dynamics and interaction. So it is reasonable to say that the more dependency the person had on their spouse and the role as husband or wife, the greater the void now that the role is no longer there.

In other words, the surviving spouse not only grieves the person who has died, they also grieve the role that is lost. They suddenly find themselves cast into the role of being a "widow" or a "widower," a role they neither relish nor desire. The question becomes, "Who am I now?" I still feel like the same person, but my roles in the family and community have changed. This, by the way, is often why a grieving spouse will find comfort in getting back to work, because at least THERE, their role remains somewhat "constant" in that familiar context.

Listen to the comments of one widow:

***"For almost a year after Jim's death, I thought of myself as only his wife. I had invested my whole self in him. I had to think, NO, I didn't give him all I had, I LOANED it to him. Now I needed to reclaim it, take it back, because I needed it for myself."***

Of course, reclaiming one's self is only possible when you know who your "self" is. Before you are able to reclaim, you have to identify and redefine, "Who am I NOW" in the light of my loss. The W of WE has to become the M of ME ... but turning a W to an M means turning everything upside down, and that is exactly what the widowed person may feel.

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So how can a grieving widow or widower redefine themselves? I think it is inextricably linked to interests and experiences. People who get involved, whether in necessary tasks like looking after children, family or work, or by involvements in the community, groups, activities, find that these things increase self-esteem and energy as they enhance the person's identity.

But let's take a walk on the wild side. Although it is grossly unfair, the widower is often viewed as more "socially acceptable" than the widow. Because the percentage of widows greatly exceeds that of widowers, males are regarded as "eligible" whereas females are regarded as a "threat." Accordingly, hostesses more frequently extend social invitations to males than to females, so a widow's social life may not be as jam-packed. On the other hand, because many men rely on their wives to arrange social activities, after her death it may be difficult to go out without her, to develop social skills, or to put forth the effort that he will need to enjoy the pleasure of other people's company. Again, social clubs or support groups can provide a good bridge to help the person develop skills, or at least feel more comfortable in such situations.

Michael, almost a year after his wife died, said:

***"I think the difference between a male's grief and that of a female is a cultural thing. Men are not as social as women. I mean I have friends, but when we sit down for a drink or something we talk about business or sports or activities. Men aren't really taught to relate their feelings, or emotions, and certainly not their vulnerabilities. So when my wife died, my friends didn't know what to say, as if they were afraid to ask me how I was feeling."***

Physical health is another area that concerns many people. Suppressed emotions can contribute to physiological symptoms, which can have serious consequences. Health doesn't just happen! It involves exercise, good nutrition, avoiding excessive intake of caffeine, alcohol or drugs. Some survivors live on coffee or snack foods and rarely eat a balanced meal.

***"The last thing in the world I wanted to do was eat. Everyone kept urging me to "eat something" so if someone was there or watching me, I would eat something to please them. But when I was alone, I ate nothing. In the first month after my husband's death, I lost 20 pounds. It wasn't till I started walking daily with my neighbor that my normal appetite returned."***

Insomnia is one of the major symptoms resulting from conjugal bereavement. This can be aided by what we do and what we consume in the hours before going to bed. But many males experience other physical symptoms.

Again Michael brings an important insight:

***"I've noticed some changes in my health. Particularly in my stomach ... pains, indigestion, and other symptoms I won't mention in polite company. My doctor put me through tests, which I think was a good thing to do, but he indicated that often men experience physiological reactions to the emotional stress of grief."***

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That doesn't minimize their importance. Maybe it's easier for us to say "I have a pain in my stomach" than it is to say, "I have an ache in my heart." But whatever it is, it is important to pay attention to the message." It may seem strange, but several people have reported to me how changing their physical environment has helped their emotional state. We should all from time to time look around our environment state. A cluttered, untidy or dismal environment can often reflect a state of mind. But the opposite is also true.

Change usually happens from the inside out rather than the other way. The more you do to enhance your environment, making it cheerful and pleasant, the more your emotional health will be positively influenced.

While everyone is different, I found after my own wife died, and I was left to raise my two young sons, that I had to carefully arrange the surroundings in my home in order to better cope. I put lots of colorful and happy things in the kitchen, because that was where I had my biggest struggles after her death. I put positive, inspiring posters and items in the bedroom, because that was where I felt most lonely. I had ONE room where I had pictures and artifacts of our life together, and when I wanted to think about her, that is where I would go. When I left that room, I closed the door and focused on all the tasks I had to get on with. Add color, brighten the place, tidy up a space for yourself, buy a new chair ... the ways to make your daily living more pleasant are innumerable and the positive impact on your emotional well-being will be tangible. There is of course no definite point at which the grieving process is complete. Can we ever say, "I have completely healed from the loss of my spouse. Who knows?"

But as we redefine ourselves; as we relinquish old roles and establish new ones; as we develop increasing confidence in our social outlets that satisfy personal needs and coincide in our social outlets that satisfy personal needs and coincide with our interests; as we become more able to talk about our loss with relative ease; as we become able to be involved in an activity without being plagued by painful memories and images; as we find ourselves more able to reach out to others, and not be afraid to have fun and even to laugh again; you will be reassured that healing is being reaffirmed.

But it does take time. As one lady put it:

***"A year was a big event for me. But once I got through that, I felt like I didn't have to look back. Now I could look forward to see what I am going to do with the rest of my life?" I want to do something significant but I'm not exactly sure what just yet. For the first time in my life I can do whatever I want and I plan to make the most of it."***

And why not?

***CFN, April 2008***

***The Grieving Well Series - Dr. Bill Webster***