

The death of a spouse is a great tragedy for the survivor. No two situations are the same and each can bring particular difficulties. Normally we tend to think of death coming during old age and the survivor, usually the widow, having to adjust to being alone and handling all those tasks that were formally taken care of by the husband now deceased.. Statistically, we know that wives do outlive husbands an average of five to eight years longer and more often for even several decades. However, we also know that even young people lose partners as well and a young wife or husband may find themselves alone with several babies, fewer resources, or while trying to hold down a job at the same time.

As liberated as modern marriages have become, it is still safe to say that the conventional husband/wife roles still prevail. Even women working outside the home are expected to be responsible for everything within the house: the housekeeping, meal preparing, and children rearing. Husbands, in turn, still see themselves as the main breadwinners and household financial managers, as well as caretakers of the outside house, grounds, and car. The result of these divisions is obvious. Upon the death of either spouse, the other is often ill-prepared to assume the responsibilities of the other. A husband for example may find himself totally or partially unequipped to cook, clean or take care of children as well as his deceased spouse. The most recent studies indicate that widowers have a worse time of handling grief than widows. Part of this is due to a more limited support system on the part of men than of women. As well, husbands tend to be so much more dependent on their wives for emotional and physical support. When a wife dies the husband loses these significant anchors.

Likewise, couples often work in tandem together. A socially shy husband might find it easy to function with an outgoing wife by his side. If she dies however, this harmonious ability to function is broken and he may find himself a passive observer of life instead of a participant.

So much of social life circulates around being a couple that it is not unnatural to feel awkward or excluded from daily events. Often the widow may feel abandoned by once numerous friends. Adding to this loss is the pain that loneliness can bring. A couple married for thirty, forty or fifty years have obviously established strong routines and patterns. When they abruptly cease it takes time to develop new ones to replace the vacuum. When a partner dies they lose a friend, companion, lover, spouse, financial and work partner. They also however often lose their identity as a married person, as a spouse of the other. Practical changes immediately follow including sometimes a decrease in income or living standard, but always a change in day to day life patterns. It takes time to establish new identities and routines. Physical health can also decline more rapidly after a spouse dies as the satisfaction with the 'quality of life' decreases.

It is not uncommon for a widow or widower to slide into a long depression. There also may be a temptation to retreat and to stay in one's shell or to become over dependent or overly demanding upon one's children. Either are forms of escape and can become disruptive to family systems. Facing one's needs square on and doing as much as

possible by one's self or with the aid of support groups helps nourish the feeling of control and reintegration into daily life.

Often there is a tendency to canonise the deceased, to remember only the good things and none of the bad. Their belongings can likewise become "holy relics" and their rooms "sacred shrines." Although none of this is necessarily bad in itself, eventually time brings a perspective that allows one to disengage and begin the process of sorting through belongings. There can be a danger of making sudden decisions such as selling the house or even in extreme case wanting to get remarried as soon as possible. A good rule of thumb is to make no major decisions for at least a year.

A less discussed issue is the fact that the death of a spouse can bring freedom and a new lease on life for those who feel trapped in a loveless or problematic marriage. It is important to note this because as genuinely tragic and sorrowful as a loss may be there is often a feeling of relief and independence as well. Sometimes one may then in turn feel guilty about enjoying such a sense of relief. Likewise, if one has been the caregiver for a terminal spouse the ensuing liberation that comes with their release from pain and suffering and your own release from the stress and work of tending to them can be almost euphoric.

### **Community Resources**

Depending on your locale, some support sources may not be present. A family doctor, mental health centre, hospital, social worker, counsellor, clergy or your funeral director can assist you with an appropriate referral in these cases.

HOSPICE - Supports the dying person and their family, before, during and after a death.

W.H.O. - Widows Helping Others - On-going support group

### **Suggested Reading**

Caine, Lynn, *Widow*, New York, 1974.

Kohn, Jane Burgess & Kohn, Willard K., *The Widower*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1978.

Loewinsohn, Ruth Jean, *Survival Handbook for Widows*, Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman & Co., 1984.

Wylie, Betty Jane. *Beginnings: A Book For Widows*. McCelland and Stewart, 1985.