

# Grief After Spousal/Partner Loss

**You're not alone.  
We're here to listen.**  
There is no timeline for grief. Knowing there are supports and resources available can give hope as you move through your grief.

You may experience uncertainty about your identity, as you transition from “we” to “me,” with multiple internal and external factors impacting your response to this unique grief.

## Internal Factors:

**Age:** Inevitably, you will have more experiences with death as you age. When you are younger, the social supports around you are more likely to be other couples who have not experienced this kind of loss. Whereas, when older, you may have supports who have also experienced spousal/partner loss.

**Gender:** You may experience gender-stereotyped responses from others within your communities. These stereotypes can present as outdated expectations for “how you should” grieve based solely on age and gender.

**Your cultural background, religious, spiritual, or family beliefs and values:** Your cultural practices, how you were raised, and the belief system you have cultivated throughout the years can impact your grief journey, your mourning practices, and expectations for you in the future.

**Your coping style before the loss:** The development of coping styles begins in early childhood and develops through your experiences with stress.

- **Active coping** – problem-solving, emotion recognition, and processing.
- **Avoidant coping** – short-term relief and may have negative long-term consequences (substance use, denial, self-blame).

## External Factors:

- **Age of your spouse/partner:** adult, middle-aged, older adult
- **Length of time you were together**
- **Nature of the relationship you had:** strained, mutually dependent, highly dependent, interdependent
- **Number of losses you have already experienced**

Grief following the death of a spouse or partner can cause significant lifestyle changes that commonly bring about a multitude of feelings at different times and varying intensities.



You will feel a range of emotions at different intensity levels and your feelings may differ from what other grievers are experiencing. Strong emotions may seem to come from nowhere and initially feel uncontrollable or overwhelming. Allowing yourself to acknowledge and express your feelings in a safe way is how you begin to heal. This process cannot be rushed. Remember, this is your process, and this is your healing.

### Sadness:

Sadness can occur without warning and feel intense at times.

#### Coping strategies:

- Give yourself permission to cry.
- Take time to care for yourself.
- Allow yourself to express your sadness outwardly.
- Use music or other memory-linking activities to encourage mourning.
- Write letters to your loved one who died or talk to them to encourage continued connections.
- Reach out to others to be in the same physical space or talk about your loved one and your sadness.

### Worry, Fear, Anxiety:

You may question if you will feel “normal” again, preoccupied with thoughts surrounding your loved one’s death. You may find yourself worrying about your future. As a result, you might be tempted to avoid or stop yourself from thinking about anxiety-provoking worries. Remember, discomfort increases when we do not allow our minds to face our fears.

#### Coping strategies:

- Write down or talk about your fears with others.
- Ask questions: talk your questions out with a trusted person. Begin your work towards accepting that you may not be able to find the answers you are looking for.
- Take time in your day to remember to breathe deeply. During grief, our breathing can be impacted. Taking moments in the day to focus on deep breaths will help you reconnect with yourself and feel grounded in the moment.

### Shock, Numbness, and Denial:

These emotions naturally occur, as the feelings and pain connected to loss would be too overwhelming to process all at once; however, they will subside over time.

#### Coping strategies:

- Refrain from making significant/major decisions (if possible).
- Practice self-compassion.
- Give yourself time.

### Anger:

Anger is a typical grief reaction and plays a vital role at different times during your grief process. Anger can provide a sense of control, enhance motivation and push you to complete tasks. However, you may find that your anger is towards others (blame). Therefore, it is essential to release anger in a way that is safe for you and others.

#### Coping strategies:

- Physical exercise.
- Tensing and releasing large muscle groups.
- Deep controlled breathing.
- Screaming outdoors or singing loudly when you are on your own (**not** directly at someone).
- Be aware of what your anger is telling you in the moment: take time and step away (give yourself breaks).

### Withdrawal/Isolation/Loneliness:

Grief can cause discomfort in those around you. Identify individuals you can contact for support, help, and comfort.

#### Coping strategies:

- Set a plan to connect with a trusted support or attend a support group.
- Make time to leave your home daily.
- Complete a simple task or sit outside, even briefly.
- “Don’t confuse being alone with loneliness. Part of your grief healing is learning how to be alone again.” (A. Wolfelt, 2003)

Doka, K. J. (2016). When your spouse dies. In *Grief is a journey: finding your path through loss* (pp. 105–124). essay, Atria Books.  
Wolfelt, A. D. (2003). *Healing a spouse’s grieving heart: 100 practical ideas after your husband or wife dies*. Companion.  
Wolfelt, A. D. (2016, December 15). *Helping Yourself Heal When Your Spouse Dies*. Center for Loss & Life Transition. <https://www.centerforloss.com/>