

Family and Caregiver Education

BEREAVEMENT

Coping with Partner Loss

“I didn’t understand at all that the memories accumulated during years of happiness could weigh enough to balance so large a loss, or that the mind will sometimes find a way to free the heart from pain.”

–Eric Kraft, *“Little Follies: The Personal History, Adventure, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy (So Far)”*

A partner’s death is unlike any other type of loss. It can create mental, emotional, physical, social and spiritual symptoms that prolong grief and make it difficult to move forward.

Mentally, clients report feeling unmoored and in the grip of brain fog, especially the first few months. Struggling to make decisions is normal, feelings of procrastination and an inability to concentrate are all normal. To help manage these symptoms, try to take frequent rest breaks, avoid tackling complicated tasks alone, and understand that it is OK to give yourself grace.

Emotionally, you may feel you are on a roller coaster. You can experience mood swings or feel a sense of numbness about everyday life. Nothing feels as important as the person you have lost. Anxiety is common, even if you are typically calm and in control of your emotions. Being gentle with yourself, reaching out to others to process your emotions, and allowing the feelings to ebb and flow in a natural way are positive ways to deal with these big feelings.

Physically, you may feel unusual fatigue, a tightness in your chest, sleep disturbances, dehydration or a change in appetite. Resting frequently, eating smaller meals several times a day, avoiding alcohol and scheduling light exercise can reduce the physical symptoms you are feeling. Tears are necessary, and the chemical makeup of emotional tears differs from other tears — they have some pain-killing properties and provide much-needed emotional release. Try to create time for your tears; allowing your emotions to well up is necessary and helpful to the process of moving forward. If possible, schedule a physical with your doctor within the first few months. Stress can manifest in our bodies in negative ways. It is important to promptly catch and treat any changes in our bodies that might occur.

Socially, people often retreat into themselves and want to turn down invitations from family and friends. It is normal to become easily irritated and be quick to anger. While retreating can feel like the best choice when you are overwhelmed, too much isolation can become unhealthy. Risk-taking behavior can increase temporarily, and substance or other addictions can return, even after long periods of abstinence. Regularly interacting with others will assist in keeping some balance in your life. Plus, talking with people you trust can help you identify and rein in extreme behavior. Creating a routine that includes others (including pets) can start to normalize your life and help you move forward in a healthy way.

Spiritual losses can include questioning your values or beliefs, lacking meaning or purpose in life, or inner conflicts where once your beliefs felt rock-solid. Anger and questions about the lack of fairness in your life are both common. Wondering if your faith is misplaced or experiencing anger at your loss can create a crisis of faith for some. Speaking with a spiritual advisor who shares your beliefs is often helpful to sort through some of these confusing feelings. Continuing any routine rituals or activities, talking with like-minded friends or attending a grief group that is affiliated with your particular beliefs can be comforting and helpful during this confusing time.

At times, our bond with our partner has not been easy to navigate. Long-term caregiving, family drama or difficult issues within the partnership can impact our connection with our loved one and make it difficult to avoid feeling guilt or regret. Others may not understand our complicated feelings about the relationship, and it can feel as if you have no one to help process your emotions. At times, the symptoms of grief can be so overwhelming that we do not feel as if they can be overcome. Connecting with a professional grief counselor can be useful and validating. They can be a neutral person to assist in processing your feelings and act as a guide to support you on your grief journey.

Losing a partner impacts every part of your life and it can take time to create a new and satisfying life. Listen to your intuition, take breaks from your grief, seek out healthy ways to calm and sooth yourself, and allow others to join you as you navigate the ups and downs of your new normal.