

*Grieving Your*  
**SPOUSE**

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This booklet provides you with practical strategies for healing after the loss of your spouse. It also answers some of the most common questions about grief. I hope it helps you as you mourn the death of your loved one.

*Sincerely,*  
Jason Troyer PhD



## **Normal Reactions following the Death of a Spouse**

The loss of a spouse is often the loss of your closest companion. You likely shared similar friends, hobbies, daily tasks, travel, parenting, and many other things with your spouse. Furthermore, the death of a spouse or partner can remind you of your own mortality. Below are some of the most common reactions following the loss of a spouse or partner.

### *Shock & Disbelief*

Depending on the cause of death, the loss of your spouse may result in feelings of shock and disbelief. Many people feel like they are walking through a fog when they are in shock and may not even cry. This sense of shock may last a few hours or several weeks, and it is a normal reaction unless it lasts for more than several weeks.



## *Sadness & Loneliness*

Your spouse was likely the person with whom you spent most of your time. Their loss will leave a large hole in your life, and you will notice their absence at meal times and throughout the day. You may also feel especially lonely in the evening and on weekends when you would normally be spending time with your spouse.

## *Guilt & Anger*

Guilt and anger are both common reactions following the loss of a spouse. You may keep asking yourself “What if” questions. You may feel guilt about things left unsaid or actions you wish you had taken. You may also find yourself angry at someone you hold responsible for your loved one’s death or angry at your loved one because their actions influenced their loss (e.g., not getting a medical check-up, taking unnecessary chances, etc.).

## *Physical & Psychological Reactions*

You may also experience some of the following physical or psychological reactions:

- ❖ Aches & Pains
- ❖ Fatigue
- ❖ Loss of Appetite
- ❖ Tenseness
- ❖ Nausea
- ❖ Forgetfulness
- ❖ Insomnia
- ❖ Hopelessness

Although these are common and normal reactions, if you experience significant physical or emotional distress, it is important to seek help from a mental health or medical professional.

## How Long Will My Grief Last?

Unfortunately, our culture suggests that grief is something you “get over” in a matter of a few days or weeks. This is not realistic. Most people grieving a spouse find their grief lessens after several months or a year, but may also feel that a part of them is always grieving the loss of their loved one.

### *Grief Bursts*

It is common and normal to experience ‘grief bursts’ – which are moments when your grief is especially painful. These bursts of grief may be due to significant days (e.g., your spouse’s birthday, wedding anniversary, holidays, etc.) or random reminders of your loved one (e.g., hearing a familiar song or seeing someone who looks like your loved one). Grief bursts are painful, but they are a normal part of grieving. Experiencing grief bursts does not mean that you are regressing or grieving incorrectly.

### *The Stages of Grief*

A common question about grief relates to Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’s ‘Stages of Grief’ (which includes: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance). Given their popularity, you might assume the stages of grief are the “right” way to grieve – but this is incorrect. Many people experience some of the reactions, but there is no evidence that everyone must go through all the reactions, nor should they happen in a specific order. Research and personal experience show us that grief reactions are very individualized. So don’t be worried if your grief process does not follow the stages of grief.

## Grieving Styles: Heart & Head Grievers

I believe (and recent research supports this view) there is not one correct way to grieve. One view of grief I find useful is the idea that there are two styles of grieving: heart grievers and head grievers. Both styles can be normal and healthy. Heart grievers find comfort in sharing their feelings with others, experience grief very intensely, and express their sadness through tears.

Conversely, head grievers express their grief through their thoughts and actions, are uneasy crying in front of others, and often focus on solving problems associated with their loss. For example, a head griever may express his grief through volunteering for a charity, thinking about his spouse while he exercises, and choosing private moments to express his feelings. Not surprisingly, men are more likely to be head grievers, but a significant number of women also identify with this style. I should note that most people have some aspects of both styles, but often feel more comfortable with one over the other.

*Note: The concept of head & heart grievers is based on the grieving styles research of Drs. Ken Doka & Terry Martin.*



## How Can I Help Myself?

One of the most common questions about grief is “How can I help myself with my grief?” Although grief is not something you can “solve” or “fix,” there are several ways you can help yourself.

### *Be Gentle & Patient with Yourself*

There are no prizes for trying to rush through your grief. In fact, you will often cause more problems if you try to hurry through your grief. Grant yourself the time to experience your grief.

### *Be Open to Opportunities*

Many widowed people are hesitant to be a “third wheel” and turn down opportunities to socialize with others. I would encourage you to accept offers to socialize with others, if you feel like doing so. And don’t be afraid to organize outings and events that include other widowed people.

### *It’s OK to Say “No”*

While you may enjoy socializing with others, it can also be helpful to cut back on your normal activities for a while. It is reasonable to cut back on some of your usual responsibilities and simply focus on taking care of yourself.



## *Take Care of Yourself*

Be sure to eat healthy, exercise, and take care of your physical health. It is common to feel a strange combination of exhaustion and restlessness, yet also have difficulty falling and staying asleep. Eating well and exercising can help drain some of this restlessness and may help you sleep better.

## *Share Your Thoughts & Feelings*

Setting aside time when you feel comfortable talking with others can be very helpful. This may involve talking with a trusted friend or family member, a grief group, a clergy person, or a therapist. You may prefer to write down your thoughts and feelings in a personal journal or diary.

## *Special Reminders*

Create a visual reminder of your spouse as a way to remember and honor them. Examples may include scrapbooks, photo albums, and video montages. You may also find it comforting to carry a special item with you. For example, you might carry a picture of them, a piece of jewelry, or something else of significance as a way to continue to feel close to them.

## *Engage in Meaningful Rituals & Activities*

You may find it helpful to create meaningful habits and activities. These actions may be large or small, public or private. For example, you may find comfort in going to the cemetery or another special place to remember your spouse. You might decide to donate money in your spouse's name or volunteer for a meaningful cause.

## Need More Help?

Visit [www.GriefPlan.com](http://www.GriefPlan.com) for helpful videos and articles to help you heal, remember, and rebuild after loss. These resources cover topics such as:

- ❖ Helping children as they grieve
- ❖ Healing after the loss of a spouse, parent, child, and other loved ones
- ❖ Dealing with traumatic losses due to suicide, overdose, and accidents
- ❖ Recognizing signs that you may need professional help
- ❖ A step-by-step video program to help you through your grief

### About the Author

Dr. Jason Troyer earned his master's degree in counseling and his doctorate in counseling psychology. He is a published author, grief researcher, and former college professor and therapist.

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