

Coping with the Loss of a Spouse: Is it Grief or is it Depression?

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Relationship Specialist Dr. Hayley Hirschmann with Morris Psychological Group Provides Tips for Grieving Spouses



(HealthNewsDigest.com) - Parsippany, NJ, July 2014 - Losing a husband or wife is devastating. A whirlwind of intense emotions - overwhelming sadness as well as shock, fear, guilt, anger, and numbness - make the days and weeks after a spouse's death agonizing and confusing. It may be small comfort to know that these feelings are normal and will be temporary but it is in fact the case that grieving is a finite process.

"Sadness may never go away entirely," says clinical psychologist Dr. Hayley Hirschmann of Morris Psychological Group, "but the pain of acute grief becomes less intense over time as the good days start to outnumber the bad and eventually the bereaved spouse reaches a state of emotional equilibrium."

Grieving is different for everyone. There is no universal road map for the process and no timetable by which to track it. So what should you expect? How long is too long? How do you know when you're stuck and need help? "Your own judgment is the best guide," says Dr. Hirschmann, "not the experience of a friend or the advice in a book or magazine or online. As a very general rule of thumb, if after a period of six months or so, you have had no lessening of intense feelings of loss, are unable to cope with day-to-day activities, are sleeping too much or too little, or are turning to drugs or alcohol or other reckless behavior to assuage your pain, you may be suffering from complicated grief or depression and should seek help from a qualified counselor."

Complicated grief

Complicated grief, also known as traumatic grief, does not diminish over time and, untreated, may get worse and persist for years. It is characterized by an inability to accept the loss and resume a satisfying life. "Although anyone can suffer from complicated grief, it is more likely to occur when the death was sudden or violent," says Dr. Hirschmann. "It is also more likely when the relationship was angry or ambivalent or when the mourner was overly dependent on the deceased." Symptoms include prolonged preoccupation with reminders and memories of the deceased, intense longing for the spouse, blaming oneself for the death, and bitterness about the loss. Complicated grief often entails symptoms of depression and is not likely to resolve without treatment.

Depression

Grief and depression both involve feelings of sadness and it is often thought that depression is a natural manifestation of grief. In fact, the two are different. The sadness associated with mourning a spouse is specific to the loss, fluctuates in intensity - there are good and bad days - and wanes over time. The sadness that accompanies depression is more generalized, more persistent and more severe. People suffering from depression are sad almost all the time, have difficulty managing daily routines, are unable to find interest or pleasure in most activities and cannot shake feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness. As with complicated grief, depression is unlikely to fade and requires treatment.

"For years, there has been conventional wisdom that says we grieve in stages, beginning with denial and ending with acceptance," says Dr. Hirschmann. "But studies have shown that there is no one way that people respond to the loss of a spouse and that even for a particular individual, mourning does not follow a smooth progression. Most peoples' moods fluctuate as they have wild swings of hopeful and despairing feelings that gradually diminish in frequency and intensity. Whatever the pattern, we can recommend coping strategies for getting through the acute phases of grief."

Tips for coping with loss

- Accentuate the positive: Studies have shown that those who are able to draw on humor and pleasurable memories are happier and healthier than those whose thoughts of the deceased are mostly sad and focused on their loss.
- Let others help: Don't shy away from expressing your feelings to those close to you; you will feel less alone if you can share your grief with a sympathetic listener. Accept help with chores and legal and financial responsibilities. Consider joining a bereavement support group.
- Take care of yourself: Eat well, exercise regularly, get enough sleep. Be alert to falling into bad habits.
- Don't make big changes right away: Wait a while before moving or changing jobs.

"Grief is a natural and necessary response to the loss of a spouse," Dr. Hirschmann concludes. "But if unresolved feelings and other individual factors make it a prolonged and destructive process, don't hesitate to seek help. Counseling can help you learn to live in a changed world, manage painful feelings and resume a satisfying and joyful life."

Hayley Hirschmann, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist who treats issues specific to women, such as postpartum depression, menopause related depression, adjustment to divorce or single parenthood, and coping with chronic illness, losses or trauma.

The Morris Psychological Group, P.A. offers a wide range of therapy and evaluation services to adults, children and adolescents. www.morrispsych.com