



Surviving the Loss of a Spouse

By: Richard D. Dobbins

I remember the evening clearly. It was after 5 p.m. I was leaning against the breakfast bar. My wife and youngest daughter were in the family room with me. We were waiting for the results from several days of diagnostic tests my wife had undergone to determine the cause of her intense and highly mobile back pain.

Then, it came ... the sudden ring of the telephone. Even though we were expecting it, the ring startled us. The voice on the other end was that of our family doctor. "I'm afraid I don't have good news for you," he said grimly. "Your wife's back pain is coming from tumors that appear to be a form of lymphoma. We'll have to take further tests to determine the kind of lymphoma we are dealing with. I suppose the only good news is that these kinds of cancers can respond very well to chemotherapy." He prayed for us and hung up. I was left with the responsibility of telling my wife and family. We were in shock.

The initial shock that accompanies heartbreaking news is a merciful anesthetic to those who must face tragic moments. For several hours, what was happening to us seemed like a nightmare from which we would awaken.

Being a minister and mental health professional I had been through similar moments with many people. Even so, my past experiences could not make me, my wife, and my family immune from what other couples and families face when they experience similar circumstances.

At the time, little did we know that we were beginning a 3-year battle that would end with Dolores' death in the summer of 1992. So, we did what other families in our church had done in similar times of crisis. We notified our pastor and friends in the ministry and asked them to pray for us. Initially, we received daily phone calls from people wanting to know about Dolores' condition.

Congregations across the country prayed for Dolores' healing. Our family found great hope and comfort in this. However, as the weeks and months passed and the disease refused to loose its deadly grip on her body, we had to face the possibility that we might lose her. We could no longer deny it.

Surrendering Your Spouse To God Can Be Difficult

As a man, and particularly as a pastor, I thought I should have been able to protect my wife from this threat to her life. After all, didn't we believe in healing? Hadn't people around the world prayed for her healing? I do not know how many people called to give us a word from the Lord that this sickness was not unto death, but for the glory of God.

Going home from the office one evening I found myself in an intense struggle with these contradictions. In the middle of my pain, the Lord reminded me of Abraham and Isaac going up Mount Moriah and challenged me to put Dolores in His hands. "After all," He seemed to say, "if I want Dolores there with you, cancer will never kill her. And, if I want her here with Me, all the prayers on earth will never heal her." Although, this did not alter the intensity of my prayers for her healing, it did help me to surrender her to God. This is one of the most difficult spiritual challenges you face when dealing with the possible loss of a loved one.

There was no doubt Dolores was more aware of what was happening to her than I or the children, since the disease was in her body and she had to deal daily with the pain and the medical procedures required to battle it. She had her last chemotherapy treatment just before Christmas in 1991. Because the outcome was not good our oncologist delayed relaying the news to us until after the holidays.

We knew we served a God of miracles, and we never doubted His ability to heal. After Christmas, however, it became obvious that short of a miracle we had only a few weeks or, at the most, a few months together. So we talked.

She shared with me her anxieties about death and hopes of heaven. When you go through the valley of death with a spouse, you are confronted with your own mortality. The illusion that death happens to others, but not to you, dissolves.

When Possible ... Talking Is Important

When your spouse is snatched from you suddenly, death deprives you of the opportunity to say the loving and intimate things to each other that tend to ease your parting. Inevitably this aggravates the grieving process and often gives rise to regrets.

However, when your spouse's death occurs gradually over a period of weeks or months, you have opportunity to prepare for final separation. So, we had time to do things that were important to us.

I did not want her to feel alone, so I insisted that we talk about what was happening to her. She needed to express what she was experiencing, and I needed to let her teach me what it was like to experience death. So, we talked ... long and often.

As a family, we decided to keep Dolores at home when the medical community could do no more for her. As long as she could and wanted to, she did the familiar things around the house that she had done through the years. So, until 2 weeks before she died, she fixed sandwiches and soup for us at night ... and insisted on doing the dishes.

Then as death drew nearer, hospice nurses were with us around the clock. The team we had was wonderful. Several times during the final days the children and I stood around her bedside and sang her favorite hymns and choruses. We played taped passages of her favorite Scriptures.

Since we were up with her most of her last night, a little before 8 a.m. the hospice nurse thought we had time to slip downstairs for a cup of coffee and breakfast. We had just seated ourselves at the table, however, when the nurse came down and softly said, "I am sorry to tell you that Dolores just slipped into the presence of the Lord." It was almost as if she had waited until we were out of the room so she could spare us seeing her draw her last breath.

Planning Ahead Helps ... When You Can

We all rushed up to the bedroom to view Dolores and comfort each other. After the children went downstairs, I stayed behind and waited for the mortician to come. This was among the things I had determined to do ahead of time. I had also determined not to kiss her body after she departed. After all, you kiss a person ... not a body.

I decided I would stay with her body as long as she was in our home and accompany her body to the hearse. Watching the hearse pull out of the driveway carrying the body of your spouse is an unforgettable moment in the grieving process.

Out of my respect for her as my wife, I wore my wedding ring until her burial. However, to keep me from denying the pain of her loss, I decided I would take my wedding ring off at the gravesite and give it to our son as a memorial of our love for him and each other.

I also decided to take the diamonds from my wife's engagement and wedding ring and have a set of earrings made for our youngest daughter and a diamond necklace for our oldest daughter. These gestures provided our children with lasting mementos of their mother; helped me begin to put some closure on this tragedy in my own life; and restored to me some sense of control over a set of circumstances that had rendered me powerless.

Generally, I do not think it is emotionally healthy to continue wearing your wedding ring after the funeral of your spouse. This can easily become a way of denying your loss. After all, according to the Scripture when your spouse dies, your marriage ends (Romans 7:2,3).

Some women may want to wear their wedding ring during their grieving process because they do not want to attract the attention of other men. When a woman chooses to do this, however, she needs to understand the risk she is running of denying her loss and extending her period of grief. Taking off your wedding ring confronts you with the fact you are no longer married. The sooner this occurs after the funeral the healthier it will be for you, but be patient with yourself.

Grief Heals From The Inside Out

Do not deny your grief ... and do not be embarrassed by it. Losing a spouse strikes pain to the deepest part of your spirit. Deep emotional anguish is a normal part of this tragic life experience.

The period of your grief will vary according to the nature of your relationship with your spouse and how suddenly or prolonged the death of your spouse happened to be. Usually, the more sudden your loss, the longer your grief since you had no time to prepare for it. If your spouse dies suddenly from natural causes, it may take 2 years to recover. However, if you lost your spouse to war, accidental death, murder, or suicide your grief may extend to 3 or more years. This is called aggravated grief. Most people need the help of a competent pastor or Christian mental health professional to deal with the spiritual and emotional issues provoked by these special kinds of losses.

When your spouse faces a prolonged death, much of your grief work is done before her death. This is known as anticipatory grief.

I was grateful for the time Dolores and I had to prepare for our inevitable separation. Even though marriage vows remind couples that death will inevitably part them, most couples seem to forget that once they are married. Couples live as though they will always have each other. The first big adjustment you make to your spouse's death is getting used to the fact she is gone, and you are alone.

Visiting The Cemetery Can Help You Grieve

The cemetery where Dolores is buried is just a few minutes from our home. Her grave is right next to a road in the cemetery. I visited her grave every day for the first 6 months after her death. If it was raining, I would just sit in the car and reflect on the 47 years we had together. When the weather would permit, I stood in front of her grave and meditated for a while on special moments from our marriage. Often I would spend time in prayer, opening my spirit for God to touch my grief with His comforting hand. These trips were a real help to me in getting through my grieving process.

Cry Whenever And Wherever You Feel Like It

Do not be too embarrassed to cry whenever you feel like it. At times, I would be seated in a restaurant with friends when my grief suddenly overwhelmed me. Right there in public I began to sob. Remember, the wounds of grief are healed from the inside out.

Trying to be strong only traps you longer in your pain. As time passes your bouts with grief will become less intense and occur less frequently. That is how you know you are healing.

Learning To Be Single

After your spouse is gone, it will take you several months to learn how to be single again. I found this to be a difficult challenge. In fact, for the first 6 months I struggled in a kind of social no man's land. I was single, but I still felt married. The journey from being married back to single life is a strange one.

When the funeral is over, family and friends go back to their own lives and you are left in the same house without your spouse. This is when you discover that your spouse's spirit occupied part of the space in that house. So, for the first few weeks you feel the emptiness in the house left by death's removal of your spouse's spirit. Over time, you will discover that your spirit will expand to fill this emptiness. But until then, the loneliness is very tangible, especially when you face the empty half of your bed every night.

Even though you may give your spouse's personal belongings to family members or charitable organizations, there will be many things to remind you of his or her presence. For several days the lingering fragrance of perfumes and colognes will be in the house, and you will discover evidences of places they have visited and what they have done. Getting beyond these discoveries is part of learning to be single again.

Your Social Life Changes

The fact you are no longer included in social events for married couples begins to bring this reality home to you. In most cases, failure to include you in the group is not intentional. For example, after my wife's death I continued to go to the church we had founded and pastored for 26 years. Yet, I was never asked to join couples for Sunday dinner or after-church snacks at restaurants.

These social changes may be more awkward for men than women. Women tend to be more socially skilled than men. They are more likely to exercise the initiative to get together with other single or widowed women for enjoyable times, such as lunch or shopping. Because men are less likely to initiate fellowship they can suffer more than women from loneliness.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons why some men rush into relationships with women so soon after their spouse has died. This is seldom healthy. Often, it results in disastrous, premature marriages. Men would be wiser if they mixed socially with other guys for several months after the loss of a spouse.

Your Sexual Feelings Continue To Live

Not long after your spouse dies, you discover that your sexual feelings did not die with them ... they are still alive. This makes you aware of another void in your life caused by the passing of your spouse. This subject is so personal and sensitive. I have not found any articles that offer any practical advice for managing this part of your life.

So, let me suggest that the loving memories from your years of marriage serve as a source of comfort and relief to you as long as you remain single. Do not allow unreleased sexual passions to drive you into another relationship. Learn to be comfortable and happy as a single person before you even begin to think about bringing someone else into your life.

Learning To Live Again

Do not feel guilty when you discover you like the freedom of being single. It does feel good to come and go as you please without having to worry about how another person will respond to your actions. There is relief in discovering that one person can live for less than two. Also, not having to get a second opinion about what to buy and how much to pay for it feels liberating. These feelings are normal ... and healthy. Enjoying your single life will provide you with a cautious wisdom against surrendering it to someone who does not deserve you.

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