



## When Your Spouse Dies: Ways to Cope

By Ina Hillebrandt from Summer 2004 TIAA-CREF

“MY HUSBAND WENT INTO THE KITCHEN. He had been sitting in the living room just as happy as he could be. I heard him laugh. Then I heard a strange noise, and I went in and found him dead. I was in complete shock. I think I went through every emotion there is: I felt despair; I felt like I had been cheated and robbed; I hated people for having their husbands when mine was gone. And I wouldn't believe it. I used to go out and look inside the car to see if he was coming back. I took his bathrobe and slept in it. I went berserk for a long time—five years.”

“You lost your partner; you lost your other hand.”

These statements come from interviews and support groups I conducted for TIAA-CREF with more than 100 widows and widowers across the country during the late 1980s. But the feelings they expressed would be timely in any decade. Whether the death was sudden or followed a long illness, the pain of loss was initially intense. Many, whose husband or wife had died as long as 20 years earlier, had never spoken about it. They gave a variety of reasons: “I didn't want to burden anyone,” “No one else could understand what I was going through,” “You just have to go on,” and “What good would it do?” Sound familiar?

If you haven't been able to talk about your grief yet, the idea of voicing it may seem overwhelming, as if you'll become paralyzed, engulfed by pain. But the people in TIAA-CREF's groups showed considerable relief once they began to open up. Much to their surprise, they actually laughed and many concluded, “I feel so much better!”

Experience and research with losses, including my own—my husband, father, brother, mother, almost every aunt and uncle and cherished pets—make one point crystal clear: Not talking about the death of someone close hurts incredibly more than expressing one's feelings about it. My motto has become:

→ First, get the pain out. Then you can move on and build a full life for yourself \_\_\_\_\_ again. How do you begin, or release more, if you've already found ways to get some of the grief out?

- Talk with others about your loss.
- Keep a journal: write out your feelings.
- Find meaningful activities.



- Create balance in your days.

Following is a selection of specific tools I found helpful; you may too.

### **Handling Guilt, Anger and Resentment**

“I hated him. I hated my husband for dying.”

“You know, I still get mad at him. It’s been two years, and I still think, ‘How could you have left me like this?’ He used to do everything—drive, do the bills. Now I have to take care of it all!” (This from a very active, independent woman, who was only partly joking)

Accept that most of us feel this anger and resentment. It’s an important step in healing. We joke, but often we really are angry when someone close “deserts” us.

“Are you kidding? I went to the cemetery with my son and you could have taken me off to a mental institution. I yelled at everyone there, ‘How dare they do this to me!’ But I felt better.”

Know that guilt stalks almost all survivors— “If only I’d done this or that.”

Some of the best advice I ever got was from my brother’s doctor: “He will die, and it may be just after a shot of the morphine (we were administering at home), because ultimately that will stop his breathing. But remember, it was the disease that killed him, not you.”

### **Talking with others**

Find a support group in your area. Try different ones if the first doesn’t fit. Give the process a chance. Once you find one where you feel comfortable, you will begin to find peace and release—even fun (no kidding). These are people who’ve gone through the same experience. They understand; you are not burdening them. On the contrary, everyone in the room derives support from hearing others’ experiences, and if they can offer a word of advice to a newcomer, it gives them satisfaction.

### **Realize that it’s normal to feel guilty or to be angry or resentful toward the one who died.**

- Turn to your family. “When nighttime comes, I miss my wife the most. If I go into any kind of dive or depression, I phone one of my brothers or sisters and have a protracted conversation, and it seems to help.”



- Or don't turn to your family! "I think if you hang around with only your family and old friends, you're making a big mistake, because all you're doing is going over and over everything... I don't want that. I'm enjoying life now with new friends...often younger. I tell them things about the Depression, educate them...and they are interested in me as a new friend.
- Try "Telephone Therapy" (a term used by 12-step programs). Make a list of phone numbers of people you feel safe opening up to. When you're feeling blue, make a call. You help the person you call as much as he or she may help you.
- Consider psychotherapy; it can be extremely valuable. Both men and women said they had gone to licensed mental health professionals and found the experience very helpful in getting through the time of adjusting to the loss of their husband or wife. Me, too.
- Talk to a pet! Get one if you don't already have one; it's marvelous therapy.