

Prescriptions for the Heart

Coping with the Death of a Spouse

Losing a family member is always hard. It can cause indescribable emotional pain, especially if it is your spouse. In fact, years ago a pioneer in the study of stress and its impact on our lives listed the loss of a spouse and the most stressful experience of life.

The death of your spouse can evoke a deep feeling of shock. It requires significant emotional and social readjustment. You may struggle for some time to get used to their absence in your life. But it is good to remember that their absence is only temporary. Christians believe that we will be reunited with our loved ones, and that our time in eternity with them will never end. Jesus told His disciples that He must leave to prepare a place for them. “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you” (John 14:1-2).¹

The apostle Paul explained what happens to believers who die before us, “Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him... Therefore encourage each other with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, excerpted). His words were meant not only to encourage us in terms of hope for the future, but he seems to suggest that although we do grieve, our grief is different from that of unbelievers who do not have this hope.

During your time of grieving, it may be helpful to remember that God and His Son suffered for us. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:16-17). God wants to comfort you now at your time of greatest loss, because He loves you. Our prayer is that you will feel this love and comfort in your time of need.

Grieving is a process that can take more time than most people realize. So allow yourself whatever time you need, and try to ignore comments from others who may suggest that you are taking too long. Some who experienced grief in the Scriptures, including characters like Job and Jacob, struggled with their sense of loss and all that goes with that, for a long time. Also it may be helpful to know that the process of grieving is not a straight line from sadness to joy again, but that it can be, as C.S. Lewis said after the death of his wife, somewhat circular in that just when you thought you had progressed with some aspect of it, for example, anger or remorse, something will trigger that feeling all over again.

If you feel yourself slipping into sadness that you cannot shake and especially if you feel stuck there, you should be sure to talk with your doctor about how you are doing. He or she will try to help you determine the best way beyond your sense of loss to a place where you may be able to

support and comfort others with similar needs. Often people who lose their spouse can benefit from medical treatment for their lingering sense of sadness, especially during the initial period after their loss. Medications for depression or anxiety, which are common in this situation, can help you regain your sense of equilibrium more quickly than if you try to be strong and make it on your own.

Many who experience such a loss also find help through discussing their feelings with a counselor, pastor, or Christian friend. Many churches or other groups also offer support groups for specific losses, including the loss of a spouse. In such a group you should meet others who understand how difficult coping with your loss can be. You may even find encouragement from learning from listening to others in a group like this that the thoughts and feelings that you have been experiencing or even struggling with are more common than you thought, and that having such struggles does not mean that you are losing your mind or your faith.

Ultimately, as the apostle Paul wrote, it is our hope that gets us through these difficult times, because our hope is connected to a God who loves and cares for us, and whose promises we can trust. Claim those promises and let Him lead you through what may seem to be an uncharted wilderness to a place where you are satisfied to remain and to try to fulfill the purpose for which He is asking you to do so.

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