

A LINE ON LIFE

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Traps of Widowhood *

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The most stressful event in a person's lifetime is the loss of a spouse. This is worse for women, especially if they did not develop financial and emotional independence while their spouse was alive. Because of this — beside the normal feelings of grief and loneliness — widows might have frightening doubts about their ability to function alone. However, once you have dealt with these issues — rather than falling into the traps of widowhood — you can still lead a rewarding and satisfying life.

First, it will take at least a year to go through the grieving process. The anniversaries and holidays of each season will bring back memories that temporarily intensify your feelings of loss. Unfortunately, some people become trapped in the grieving process and fail to move beyond it. Many months after the loss, the following symptoms might be present.

- Continued weight loss.
- Sleep problems.
- Chronic feelings of fear or desperation.
- Inability to stay alone.
- Reversion to a childish state. For example, a young widow might move back to her parents' home — and not want to leave.
- Inability to concentrate.
- Unwillingness to talk about anything but the loss.

Guilt. If your spouse died from an illness or accident, you might feel guilty about surviving. You might feel guilty about not doing enough for your spouse, when he was alive. If the marriage was unhappy or you had to struggle through a long, painful illness with your spouse — you might feel more relief than sadness. These feelings are normal, but you still can feel guilty about them. When you try to develop new relationships later, you can feel both disloyal and guilty.

Fear of imposing. In your first month of mourning, you will probably get much support from neighbors, friends and family. Even though you might need more support later, others are less likely to come to see you on their own. It's not that they don't care. There are just no firm social norms for them to follow. Most of them want to help, but they just don't know how. So if you still need some kind of support, don't be afraid to let your family, friends and neighbors know that.

Making new friends. First, don't give up your old friends. However, as you start to make a new life for yourself, you will make new friends. For widows, these friends can be women or men. Beyond this, you don't need to feel pressured to date men. On the other hand, don't *avoid* dating to be loyal to your late husband. Your husband is gone — but you are still alive. It can be an interesting way to meet a variety of new people. However, don't let your dates pressure you into sexual activities until you are ready.

Remember that widowhood is not the end of your life. It can be a time to achieve personal goals you have neglected. Mourning the loss of a loved one is a painful process — but you need to remind yourself that it *is* a process. The pain will lessen, leaving room for a satisfying new way of life.

If you are trapped in grieving, get help. There might be a support group of widows connected with your religious organization. If you need one-on-one support, you can get grief counseling with a psychologist, social worker or religious counselor. Two organizations that might be able to help you are the Widowed Persons Services of the [American Association of Retired People \(AARP\)](#), 601 E Street NW, Department BL, Washington, DC 20049, and the [Bereavement and Loss Center](#) of New York, 170 E. 83rd Street, New York, NY 10028.

* Adapted from Mary R. Donahue's "Widowhood: The Psychological Traps, How to Deal with Them," *Bottom Line: Personal*, November 15, 1993, pages 13-14.