

# The impact of widowhood:

## How to support well-being for these men and women



**Social support is key to healing for widowed individuals. You can help by better understanding the potential impacts of losing a life partner and committing to strategies that support these men and women over the long term**

*by Teresa Amaral Beshwate, MPH*

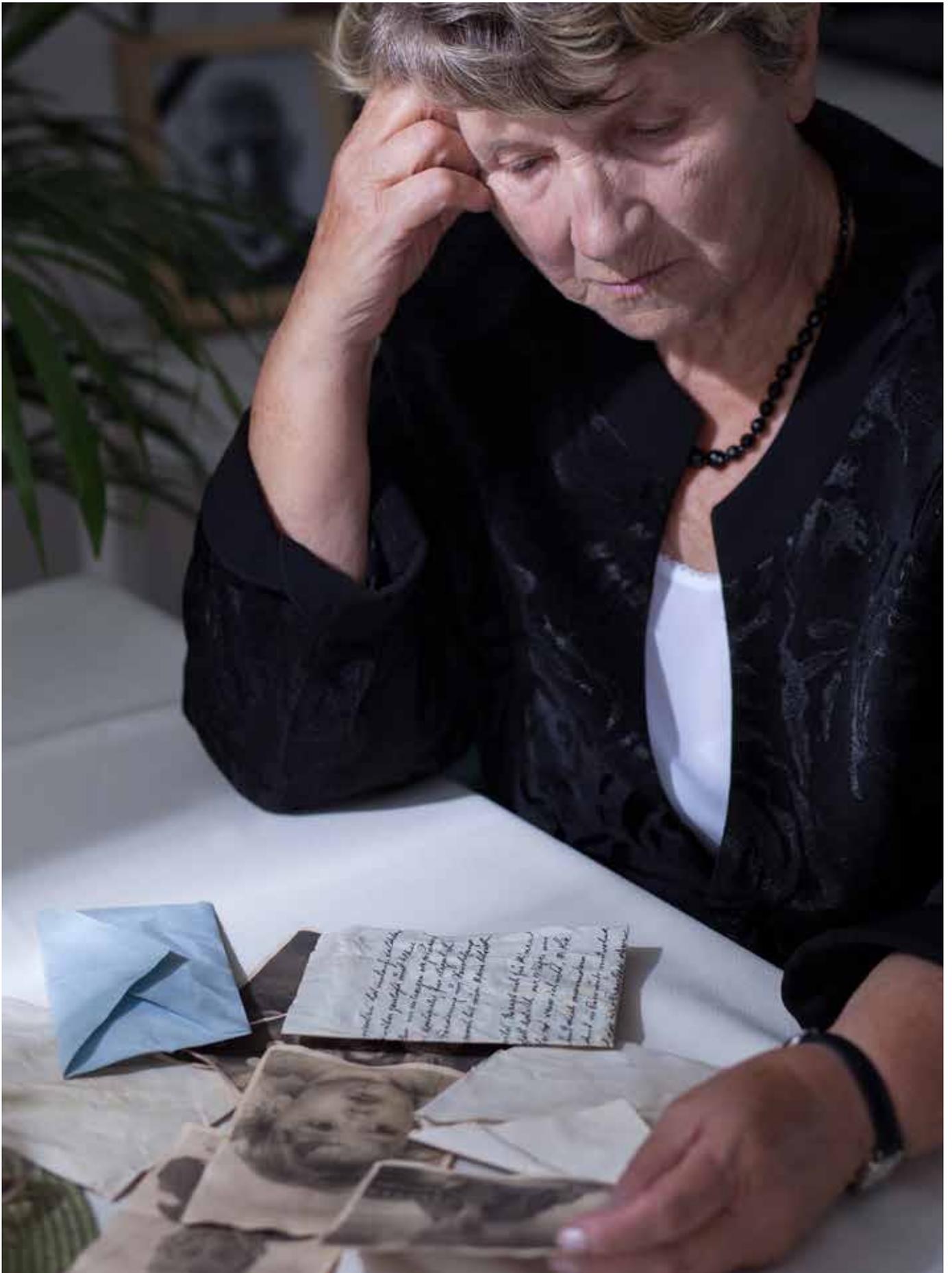
*Journal on Active Aging® editors assigned this article prior to the emergence of COVID-19 in North America. Practices to mitigate the virus's spread can complicate in-person support for widowed individuals. Readers may want to adapt suggestions or create other avenues for support.*

My husband and I were out of state celebrating our 12<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary and having lunch when his heart stopped beating. Despite my immediate response and the timely and appropriate efforts on the part of emergency services, that day I joined the ranks of the millions of people who are widowed. I was 39 years old.

To be exact, in 2018 there were 11.41 million widowed women and 3.47 million widowed men in the United States.<sup>1</sup> In Canada, widowed individuals numbered about 1.9 million in 2019.<sup>2</sup>

Losing a spouse is a common occurrence in general, and more common in older

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adults,<sup>3,4</sup> for whom it can have serious and even life-threatening consequences. The Widowhood Effect refers to the heightened risk of death for the surviving spouse, which studies show is elevated to 66% within the first three months of the loss.<sup>5</sup> The elevated risk of mortality lasts up to six months.<sup>6</sup>

A key factor in healing is social support.<sup>7</sup> Yet when I recently spoke with about 50 widows of various ages and asked them what they wish they had known in advance, they gave a common response: “That the people who said they would be there for me, would in fact not be.” What does this mean for those who serve older adults? A tremendous opportunity exists to play a role in offering meaningful, long-term support to help a grieving person navigate life after loss.

## **Guessing game**

Generally speaking, society is not savvy when it comes to grief, and for good rea-

son. At no point in our personal development do most of us formally learn about loss or how to support someone who is grieving.

Grief is as unique as each person experiencing it, which makes supporting a grieving person a guessing game. Many well-intentioned yet conflicting articles suggest what not to say or do. Well-meaning people who want to support a surviving spouse can be frozen in confusion, afraid to act for fear of making the situation worse. To the grieving person, this can feel like lack of support and prompt feelings of isolation.

Words in any language often fall short of being truly helpful to a grieving person. It’s common to be uncertain of how to speak of the deceased person—that is, in the past or present tense. People also fear that saying the deceased person’s name may cause additional pain. Sometimes in striving to say the “right” thing in the initial days after loss, empty promises are made.

## **Timelines**

As a society, we have a general notion that grieving lasts through the year of “firsts,” and then fades. Many a widowed person, however, says that the second year is more painful than the first. Perhaps this is due in part to reduced support from friends and family who incorrectly believe that the worst is over. Grief lasts longer than the outpouring of support, which is one of the tragedies experienced by the grieving.

The timeline for processing grief differs for each person. The journey is in no way linear, predictable or structured. Grieving individuals may have expectations of themselves, albeit perhaps subconsciously. They may believe that they are behind in their grief process, that they should be “better” by now or are otherwise doing it “wrong.” The emotions that come with profound loss are difficult enough. Self-judgment, guilt and a host of other emotions only add to the darkness.

It is tempting to believe that when widows or widowers find a new friendship or love interest, they have reached the end of their grieving, but this is often not the case. A new love or companion is no indication that a surviving spouse is “better” or “over it” or “moving on.” Most widowed people will say that, instead, it’s a matter of putting one foot in front of the other to move forward; learning to live in new ways out of necessity. It is possible to encourage their efforts at new companionship while still acknowledging and supporting their grief journey.

In order for professionals to be as supportive as possible to the bereaved, it helps to understand the potential impact profound loss can have.

## **Wellness implications**

The loss of a spouse can call into question the most basic of human needs, including safety, finances, independence, belonging and more. The initial loss is known as the primary loss, but secondary losses can be equally devastating. These can include

losses of the couple's shared past, the future they planned together as well as shared hopes and dreams, identity, traditions, intimacy, shared jokes and companionship, to name a few.

Profound loss impacts nearly all of the dimensions of wellness, albeit in different ways for each person. Below are considerations for many of the wellness dimensions.

#### *Emotional wellness*

Emotional wellness implications may include bereaved individuals questioning whether they can live without their spouse, and if so, whether they want to. Profound loss is incredibly draining emotionally and highly stress-producing. It often calls one's identity into question: If I'm not my husband's wife, who am I? How will I cope? Who will I have to become without him/her? The widowed person may experience major depression<sup>8</sup> or complicated grief,<sup>9,10</sup> a condition characterized by intense, prolonged grieving.

The late author and scholar C. S. Lewis is quoted as saying, "No one ever told me that grief felt so much like fear." Indeed, after we experience such trauma as losing a spouse, the brain's more primitive desire to keep us safe launches into overdrive. There is a heightened perception of danger, and fear becomes an unconscious habit. Both can delay healing.<sup>11</sup>

#### *Social wellness*

Social wellness implications may include the losses of current friends/connections, the deceased spouse's social strengths and abilities, the ability to be in a crowded and/or noisy setting, interest in hobbies, and loneliness. Simply eating out alone or going to the movies alone requires an act of courage for many widowed people.

Social stigmas related to widowed individuals are not a thing of the past.<sup>12</sup> Many a widowed person reports being shunned by former friends and no longer invited to outings with couples, despite decades-long

friendships. It is surprisingly common that many friendships end at the funeral, leaving the widowed person feeling abandoned and alone.

While there are many social implications associated with loss, strong social connections can play an important role in healing over the long term.

#### *Physical wellness*

In addition to the heightened risk of death, other physical wellness implications may include the possible inability to live independently without the spouse, lack of interest in maintaining or improving health and functional ability, and inattention to medical appointments. Adequate nutrition can be a challenge. Digestion can change dramatically, and individuals may not experience sensations of hunger or thirst. Insomnia is common among the grieving, regardless of whether the loss was expected or sudden.<sup>13</sup>

A grieving person often experiences a profound loss of energy and an increased risk of illness. Other physical wellness implications include an elevated risk of hip fracture,<sup>14</sup> increased inflammation<sup>15</sup> and lowered immunity.<sup>16</sup>

While grief takes a profound toll on physical wellness, healthy practices such as regular exercise, good nutrition and good sleep hygiene are strategies that can influence mental health and the physical symptoms of grief.<sup>17</sup>

#### *Intellectual wellness*

Widowhood is a risk factor for cognitive decline.<sup>18,19</sup> In addition, people who are grieving often experience memory problems, known as "widow brain," which in some cases is a temporary inability to learn new things and perform basic cognitive tasks. While these are a normal part of the grieving process, cognitively healthy older adults may experience a heightened fear of dementia. Whether accurate or not, perceptions about aging can translate into self-fulfilling prophecies.<sup>20</sup>

#### *Spiritual wellness*

Spiritual wellness implications may include spiritual questioning, a sense of desolation or a "dark night of the soul." Individuals may question their meaning and purpose without the spouse, without being a part of a couple. Meditation is often recommended but can prove to be challenging. On the other hand, spirituality and religion can also be successful coping mechanisms.<sup>21</sup>

#### *Vocational wellness*

Grieving individuals may be unable to continue tasks that once brought a sense of purpose. There may no longer be interest in areas they once perceived as important. The loss may prompt a reevaluation of what will bring meaning and purpose in the future.<sup>22</sup> Yet when the time is right, discovering a renewed sense of meaning and purpose can be critical in healing.

#### *Environmental wellness*

Environmental wellness has the potential to greatly help the widowed. Nature can be therapeutic for all people,<sup>23</sup> including those dealing with loss.

[Ed. Where it's not possible at this time to offer in-person social support and wellness programming, efforts to connect with widowed individuals might include letters and emails, telephone calls and one-on-one video chats. Professionals are also using online platforms to deliver classes and wellness activities as well as to hold interactive sessions such as discussion groups. To find out more, see Pat Ryan's article, "Wellness industry remains resilient during pandemic restrictions," on pages 50–57 of this *Journal on Active Aging* issue.]

### **Support strategies**

While one size definitely does not fit all when it comes to grief, here are some support strategies that you may find helpful and effective.

- First and foremost, ask widowed individuals how they would like to be sup-

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ported over time. They may not be able to answer directly, but in asking you've given them a sense of control and permission to speak up in the future.

- Invite, invite, invite. They'll very likely say no time and time again, but you've still made them feel included and remembered and that's what matters.
- Mark your calendar. Note the anniversaries of when spouses passed, wedding anniversaries, birthdays of the

deceased and surviving spouses. Reach out to individuals on those days with a simple message such as, "You are in my thoughts today." Check in on the day of the month that a spouse passed, for example, if it was the 9<sup>th</sup> of the month, make a point to connect on the 9<sup>th</sup> of each month. All holidays can be difficult for some simply because each holiday carries traditions and memories. Make a point to check in on every national holiday, along with any religious holidays that a couple celebrated. These actions alone may be of tremendous support.

instructions of how to heat it up. Coordinate with others so that there is long-term support in this area. Offer to dine in with the person or go out to their favorite restaurant for variety.

- Don't struggle for words. There are no "right" ones and often the best way to help is to simply be present and silent. Meeting the person where they are, and keeping them company in that exact place without coaxing them toward what you perceive should be the next phase of their healing, is the most precious gift of all. Use a grief-savvy conversation starter (below) and then listen, listen and listen more.
- We all want to know how the grieving person is doing. The problem is that "How are you?" is a difficult question to answer for those dealing with profound loss. Many dread the question, in fact. Grief-savvy conversation starters have a specific time frame. For example, how are you doing today? How are you feeling today? See more conversation starters in the sidebar on page 42.
- Avoid clichés such as, "Everything happens for a reason," "Heaven needed a new angel," or "She/he is in a better place." Many widowed people do not find such statements helpful.
- Speak their name. Do not be afraid to say the names of deceased people. It does not remind grieving individuals that a spouse has died—they are acutely aware of this every day. Instead, it does the very opposite—it's a reminder that a spouse lived. Shared memories are treasures to a grieving person, both initially and long term.
- If you're able to visit in person, try to gauge a surviving spouse's energy levels and plan the length of a visit accordingly.

## Resources

### Internet

#### The Sudden Widow Coach

[www.thesuddenwidowcoach.com](http://www.thesuddenwidowcoach.com)

Beshwate, T. (2020). How to Best Support a Widow Without Making Empty Promises. Sixty And Me. Available at <https://sixtyandme.com/how-to-best-support-a-widow-without-making-empty-promises/>

Hairston, S. (2019, July 11). How Grief Shows Up In Your Body. WebMD News Special Report. Available at [www.webmd.com/special-reports/grief-stages/20190711/how-grief-affects-your-body-and-mind](http://www.webmd.com/special-reports/grief-stages/20190711/how-grief-affects-your-body-and-mind)

### Print

Devine, M. (2017). *It's OK That You're Not OK: Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn't Understand*. Louisville, CO: Sounds True, Inc.

Hamer, K. (2015). *100 Acts of Love: A Girlfriend's Guide to Loving Your Friend Through Cancer or Loss*. n.p., Author. Available at [www.amazon.com/100-Acts-Love-Girlfriends-2015-05-04/dp/B01FIWM8K4](http://www.amazon.com/100-Acts-Love-Girlfriends-2015-05-04/dp/B01FIWM8K4)

- Find out what a surviving spouse does not know how to do. What tasks did the deceased carry out? Cooking, laundry, finances, household repairs, gardening and auto maintenance are just a few examples. Any new task will require a learning curve, and the bereaved will likely not be able to learn new tasks for many months. Offer to step in and help while still allowing the person to feel in control.
- Part of the isolation often felt by widowed people is due to a lack of connection to others who have a firsthand understanding of the loss of a spouse. Fellow widows and widowers may offer to have a regular gathering with the newly widowed. [Ed. Groups might turn to telephone conferencing and online video calls/conferencing platforms such as Google Meet, Skype Meet Now or Zoom to have discussions.]
- Slow down the meal train initially and keep it going long term. Initially after loss, there is often an abundance of food, nonexistent appetites and limited freezer space. The meal delivery often ends when it is needed most. Find out what type of food the person likes and can digest easily. With the significant loss of energy that accompanies grief, the simple act of chewing can be tiring. Consider soups or other soft foods that a person enjoys. Write down the

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The sidebar on this page includes further things to say and do to support widowed individuals.

## Gender considerations

While there are many similarities in how widows and widowers deal with the loss of their spouse, the evidence suggests that widowers may be more vulnerable.<sup>24,25</sup> Men are less likely to have other male widower friends; they tend to be older and less healthy, have fewer family and social ties, and experience greater difficulty in taking on domestic roles.<sup>24</sup>

Mortality and suicide rates are also higher among widowers. About one in every 600 widowers and one in every 2,300 widows commit suicide in the first year after bereavement, with rates being most elevated in the first week.<sup>26</sup>

Notice whether your community tends to support widows in different ways as compared to widowers. Given that the incidence of widowers is significantly lower, there may be a greater sense of loneliness among men, and therefore a unique approach may be in order. A group of fellow

widowers may be the most effective means of support. These individuals may need to learn different skills than widows. A long-term meal train may be even more important as well.

## Priceless gift

When a life partner is lost, the surviving spouse's world stops turning in an instant. Life is divided into two segments: before and after the profound loss.

Grief can be grueling. It's likely that no one fully understands the depth of an individual's grief, because the grieving person may tend not to burden anyone with the details or the full impact of that grief. Faced with well-intentioned people who genuinely hope the widowed person is doing better, many widows simply learn to put on a pleasant face.

A supportive community of people who care for the bereaved, know them well, and commit to support them long term is a priceless gift. My experience is that time alone does not heal. Love heals over time, and love is a verb—the sum of many small actions spread over an extended period of time. This can make the most challenging time of life simultaneously a time of feeling unprecedented support and kindness. 🍷

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## Support for the widowed: Things to say and do

### If you're not in close proximity

- I'd like to support you in the ways that are best for you.
- I've been thinking of you.
- You are in my thoughts today.
- Call every week and leave a message, "No need to return my call unless you'd like to. I just want you to know I'm here for you."
- How was your day today?
- Share a memory of the deceased spouse. "I was just thinking of that time we..."
- Speak the name of the deceased spouse.
- Ask if the person feels fearful and if so, listen without judgement or attempting to "fix."

### If you're in close proximity

- What can I do for you today?
- How can I help you today?
- What can I do for you right now?
- Would you like me to wait for you until you get home, so you don't come home to an empty house?
- I'd like to spend time with you, but we don't have to talk. Would you like to go for a walk/sit outside?
- I'd like to do some laundry for you if that's okay.

- I'd like to mow the lawn/clean your garden. Is that okay?
- I came by to offer to walk your dog if that's okay. Do you want to come?
- Please let me help you with....
- Can I give you a hug?
- Would it be okay if I brought you a meal tonight?
- I'd like to sit with you.
- I'm here for you.
- Can I drive you to your doctor's appointment?
- What can I do to help you live more independently?
- I'm going to volunteer; would you like to join me?
- Offer to pick up the person's recyclables when you are taking yours.
- Ask if the individual would like to come grocery shopping with you; if not, ask what is on the person's list and offer to drop it off.
- Bring a cup of coffee or tea or offer to take the person out for coffee or tea.
- Offer to bring lunch tomorrow or take the individual out to lunch.

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## The 'Grief Olympics'

*Teresa Beshwate describes a common response to avoid when supporting a grieving person.*

The driver of the rented family car that took us to the cemetery for my husband's funeral service described at length and in detail his own loss of his mother two years prior. I had never met this person, and I had no capacity to have that kind of conversation on that particular day.

It is not uncommon, in an effort to express empathy, that a well-intentioned person explains in detail to the grieving person about their own loss—of a parent, family member or pet. Some go as far as to compete, suggesting that their own loss was more painful. Others will liken death to divorce, suggesting "I know just how you feel."

The "Grief Olympics" will not console or uplift a surviving spouse. The truth is there are no gold medals in grief. The best way to help a grieving person is to let the moment be exclusively about them.