

## Loss of a Partner

When death or divorce means the end of a marriage, it is devastating for those who had anticipated many happy years together.

The shock, grief, pain and sheer 'aloneness' experienced by a widowed or divorced person cannot even be imagined by those who have not experienced it.

Along with the daily struggle to cope with emotions and

practical issues, they can feel isolated socially. They are no longer married, yet can't consider themselves to be single, especially if they have children. How do they get through and build a new life for themselves?

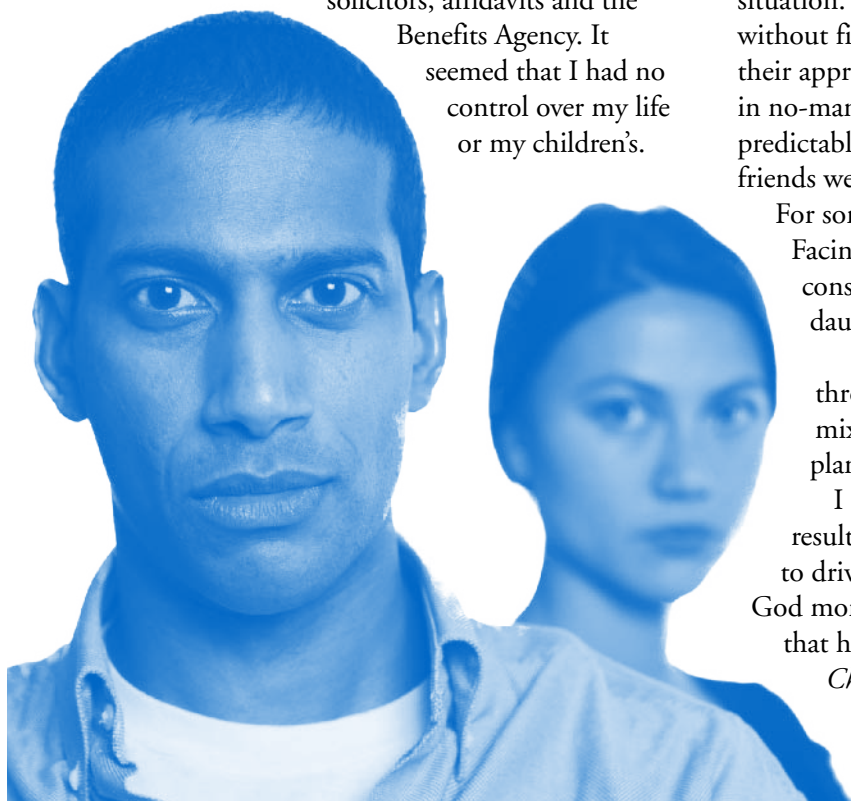
## The Road to Divorce

One Thursday evening at 10pm, my husband told me he was leaving me for someone else. Next morning he started packing. I couldn't watch him go, so I took my two sons, aged six and nine, to my parents' house.

When I returned home later, the house was quiet. My husband had left and taken many of his things with him – including our car! I was 14 weeks pregnant and had just begun the road to divorce.

Pain, shock, unreality, disbelief and relief all rumbled around inside me. I had no husband, no money and, eventually, no home. I was in unfamiliar territory:

solicitors, affidavits and the Benefits Agency. It seemed that I had no control over my life or my children's.



Anger at being betrayed and rejected, and at the hurt the boys were suffering, was almost overwhelming. I felt I had failed. Friends listened and listened. Some gave practical support too, accompanying me to the solicitor's and the court, and meeting the boys from school. With one friend in particular I allowed my feelings and frustrations to burst out: "How could he..." "He's telling lies about..." "The children said 'Daddy...'" Each time, after the anger, a good cry and a cup of tea, I was more able to cope.

Explaining my husband's absence was a conversation stopper. It seemed people were embarrassed by the whole situation. Some made comments like, "There's no smoke without fire." A person's view on divorce often coloured their approach to me and certainly their advice! I was in no-man's-land, neither married nor single. My safe, predictable world had turned upside down. Family and friends were affected too.

For some time I functioned on a day to day basis. Facing the future was impossible. I didn't want to consider life without my husband. I gave birth to my daughter with only medical staff present.

The only contact I had with my husband was through letters, and at court. My feelings were very mixed. Gradually my love for him withered, like a plant that is not watered.

I *never* want to go through divorce again. But as a result of all this I learned to make my own decisions, to drive again, to have confidence in myself, to trust God more and, most importantly, to discover the real me that had been hidden away.

*Christine*

## No choice

My marriage had been unhappy for many years. My husband's mood swings meant he could be abusive one day, and the next he was silent and would have nothing to do with me or the children. We were a dysfunctional family. I believe strongly that marriage is for life and that children need two parents, so it took me years to realise that it would be best for them if they didn't live with their father.

Yes, it was my choice to part. But it felt as if I had *no* choice and it was not entered into lightly. There was a terrible sense of loss. For nearly 20 years I believed my husband would get better and it didn't happen. I grieved for what might have been. My children's well-being was threatened as long as we stayed together. Yet they would become children of a single parent family if we separated.

The end of the marriage meant the loss of the family home, a plunge in income and my necessary return to full-time work. It meant loss of 'face' as I admitted that our family life had been one of fear and distress.

I helped my children through the worst of those first months. A great part of their swirling emotions was relief. A cloud had lifted from their lives with their father's departure. And yet, he was still their daddy and, however he had behaved towards them, they needed to love him.

If anyone had told me on my wedding day that this would happen, I would not have believed them. Contrary to popular belief, leaving a marriage is not an 'easy option' for many people. I needed the same amount of support to reach 'dry land' as I would have done if my husband had left me suddenly and unexpectedly.

Annie

## How to help those going through divorce

- Be prepared to accept them where they are, whether angry, upset or even relieved.
- Don't judge them. You haven't 'walked a mile in their shoes'.
- Look beyond the initial 'I'm fine'.
- Be inclusive in conversation - talking about your own partner may exclude them.
- Listen, and follow their leading. They may or may not want to talk about the situation. Don't pry.
- Offer help with the children and with practical matters.
- They will need help long after the first few months. Be prepared to stay for the long haul.

'There are more than 24,000 widows and widowers in this country under the age of 40. And this number rises dramatically to 110,000 under 50.'

Information from the 'WAY' website

## Widowhood for a Young Mum

For me the word 'widow' conjured up an impression of a little old lady dressed in black, until I became one in my early 30s.

My husband and I had been married for 10 years and had recently moved to a new area when he suddenly died, leaving me with two daughters aged four and 17 months.

It is impossible to describe the depth of my pain. When your heart is broken, the pain is physical. In the early weeks, I was completely unable to cope, and was helped by the support of our parents. The emotional fog lasted for about a year.

Going to parent and toddler groups and taking my elder daughter to school were the things which kept me going. These things gave structure to my week and made me remember which day it was. But I didn't find them easy.

I was aware that I was now different from everybody else. I knew most of the others would go home after the group and look forward to their husbands coming home and discussing the events of the day. This may have been an idealistic view, but when I returned home at 3 o'clock with my children, we would be alone together until the following morning.

My husband and I had talked about the possibility of having another baby. When he died, that possibility died with him. It was like a second bereavement. I felt stabbing pains in my heart when I saw someone who was pregnant or when I held a newborn baby.

I found it hard to fit in socially. I couldn't fit in with the singles, because the children were my sole responsibility, nor with married couples, since I was on my own. It would have been great if someone could have offered a night out at the cinema, for example, with someone to babysit.

I sensed that people often spoke in hushed tones when I was there. I felt I was expected always to be sad. I cried many tears for many months and had no inclination to laugh, so when I could finally see the lighter side of life again, I needed reassurance that it was allowed. It was important to have permission to be happy.

I felt a special affinity with others who had been through a similar experience. Meeting other people who had experienced the trauma of a partner's death at an early age gave me an enormous sense of strength and depth of understanding. This is what I now offer to others.

Sue

I felt a special affinity with others

## How to Help

- Be accepting. A bereaved person will have times when they are quite positive and times when they are very low. They can become low very quickly for apparently no reason. It is important that they feel safe to do that.
- Family occasions can be difficult. Make a note of the children's birthdays and perhaps offer help with organising birthday parties. Making a special time for children to celebrate can often be an overwhelming prospect for a bereaved person on their own.
- Offer practical help. Ordinary things can be stressful if they reinforce the loss, so offering information about reliable plumbers and car mechanics is beneficial.
- Be aware of anniversaries. These are stressful times as people tend to re-live the events surrounding the loss. Let the bereaved person know that you are aware the anniversary of the bereavement is coming and, where possible, enable them to mark the occasion in the way they feel is right. If they wish to be alone, offer to look after the children for the day.
- It is important to know what not to say. Unhelpful clichés such as 'Time is a great healer' or 'You'll get over it in time' can seem cruel to someone in the depths of grief. They are unaware of time, but very aware of their pain.
- Be sensitive in conversations about husbands/partners especially if they are negative. If a group of women complain about men, even if it is because they go away a lot, it is possible for someone who is bereaved to become angry and withdrawn and to feel alienated from the group.
- Be aware of issues associated with Fathers' Day, Mothering Sunday and Valentine's Day. For a child to come home with a card for Daddy on Fathers' Day when his Daddy has died is very upsetting. It is equally upsetting if he is told not to make one.
- Losing a life partner is not something you get over in a short time. People should recognise that even if bereaved people seem better on the surface, often the loss is just as acute underneath. The absence of someone else to share responsibility for the children does not go away, neither do the practical issues. Even years later, a random comment can cause an outpouring of grief. Be accepting and provide a safe place for long term care of bereaved people.

## Missing Bill

At the beginning of 1989, I was told that my husband Bill had less than three years to live. In fact we were given seven more years. Bill did suffer, but he was able to take our younger daughter down the aisle at her wedding, and to see five of his grandchildren. We grew together during those years and had some good times.

In June 1997 we discovered he had leukaemia. To say we were shattered is an understatement. I couldn't bear to let him go but his condition deteriorated rapidly. How could I want him to stay and suffer? Bill died five days before our 30th Wedding anniversary.

I felt I had just had half of me amputated without anaesthetic and I was in agony. My grieving self thought that no one could ever be in as much pain, although my rational self knew differently.

When we got home from the hospital I couldn't bear to see his jacket hanging in the hall or have his photo up. My son-in-law told me I could stay with them until the funeral, but if I could bear to be at home it would be better for me. I knew this was a word of wisdom, so I decided to stay. When everyone had gone a sense of peace came over me and I felt my home was a sanctuary.

People were very kind at first but they have their own lives and inevitably move on. However, I was still in agony

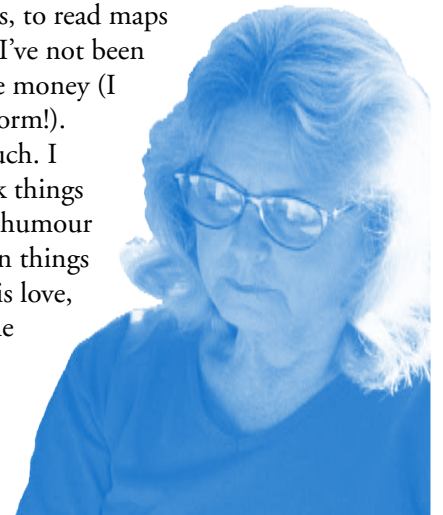
and didn't know how to cope. I felt that people avoided me because they didn't know what to say and were frightened of upsetting me.

Grief is exhausting, but I kept motivated. I have always wanted to get up and start the day and, amazingly, I have slept better than when Bill was alive. I sometimes found, though, that if something small went wrong when I was doing a job such as decorating, all my confidence vanished and I felt exhausted. That improved in time.

I had to learn to be single even though I hadn't chosen it. Social events were especially hard. I've had to learn to do new things, to read maps and 'boldly go where I've not been before' and to manage money (I can even fill in a tax form!).

I miss Bill very much. I miss being able to talk things over, his wisdom and humour and consulting him on things in the home. I miss his love, his hugs, the person he was and a hundred other things.

*Gill*



## A Different Script

Only those who have experienced bereavement can appreciate how very deep the pain goes, how unexpected the emotions are, how incomplete and lost one feels.

It has been said that the death of one's wife or husband is more like losing a leg than recovering from pneumonia. In my case that is true. I'm still limping. Though much in life has resumed normality and a sense of purpose, there are still areas which, like a lost leg, cannot be replaced. It takes months, maybe years, to learn to face the new situation and live with it.

When you have lived in a happy, close and loving relationship for many years, the death of your husband or wife hurls one into a whole new emotional and social landscape. Realising that I was on my own was like regaining consciousness after an earthquake. Familiar landmarks of my life had crumbled around me. Long established pathways of friendship, companionship, shared wisdom, common purpose and intimate relationship had ceased to exist.

There is more to the biblical truth that 'husband and wife shall be one flesh' than we realise - until one or the other goes.

Bereavement, 'bereftness', is an apt word. We, the bereaved, suffer 'loss'. Not just the physical presence of the person, but what they have become to us. Their expressions

of love to us, their support, friendship, wisdom, loyalty and their big contribution to our life together, all gone.

As well as the heartache of separation and loss, bereavement leaves us alone again, stranded on an alien shore. We have to come to terms with singleness. We find we have to reluctantly re-assess our relationships, particularly with the opposite sex. We have to resist self-centeredness, re-establish how we fit into society and reconsider our aim and purpose in life. None of this happens overnight. We need to give time for the natural outworking of our grief before important decisions are made relating to our future.

The pain of loss does not disappear. It mellows in time from the involuntary waves of grief, which squeeze one's heart until the tears flow, to a sort of background ache. But the scars are tender and easily bruised by unexpected prompting and surprise events.

Time stops. The play of my past life stopped in mid-act and I'm only slowly beginning to pick up the plot again, but with a different script and changed scenery.

One thing we experience in the immediate aftermath of bereavement is that help and comfort come from unexpected places. Conversely, expected sources of support and sympathy can be strangely lacking.

*Name withheld*

## Extra Help

### Support Groups

**A Different Journey** is Care for the Family's support network for those who have been widowed early in life, and their families. It offers 'Breakthrough' weekend and day events, and 'Signposts', a regular newsletter.

**Single Parent Family** is Care for the Family's support network for single parents; it offers weekend and day events, and 'Single Parent Family' a regular newsletter.

For details of both networks, contact Care for the Family. Garth House FREEPOST (CF4636), Cardiff CF15 7GZ  
Tel: 029 2081 0800

Web: [www.careforthefamily.org.uk/spf](http://www.careforthefamily.org.uk/spf)

Web: [www.careforthefamily.org.uk/adj](http://www.careforthefamily.org.uk/adj)

### Cruse Bereavement Care

126 Sheen Road  
Richmond, Surrey TW9 1UR  
Tel: 020 8939 9530

Helpline: 0870 167 1677

Web: [www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk](http://www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk)

**The National Association of Widows** has a 'Younger Widows Contact List', putting widows up to the age of

50 in touch with each other.

Tel: 024 7663 4848

Web: [www.widows.uk.net](http://www.widows.uk.net)

### One Parent Families

255 Kentish Town Road  
London NW5 2LX

Helpline: 0800 185026

Web: [www.oneparentfamilies.org.uk](http://www.oneparentfamilies.org.uk)

### Bookshelf

#### *Basil in Blunderland*

Basil Hume, Darton, Longman and Todd,  
ISBN 0232522421

#### *All Alone? Help and Hope for Single Parents*

Jill Worth and Christine Tufnell, Paternoster Press, £5.99,  
ISBN 17818504396  
(Available from Care for the Family. B931)

#### *Inside Grief - a Personal Account of Coping With Grief*

Kathy O'Brien, Authentic Media, ISBN 1860244637.

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