Gay and lesbian issues: grieving the loss of a partner

Whether due to death or separation, anyone who has recently lost a life partner is likely to feel as though their life has been turned upside down. There's not only the loss of a loved one to deal with, but also the loss of a way of life as part of a couple. For bereaved gay or lesbian partners who have not fully "come out," there's the additional trauma of having to try to grieve in secret, with reduced support from those around them.



If you are recently bereaved or separated, there will be challenges but you will get through them, one day at a time.

In this article, we'll take a look at some of the issues and emotions you may face over the next few months—some of them are common to everyone who has lost a loved one, and some are more specifically related to gay and lesbian issues.

If you're "in the closet" about your sexual identity

[If this isn't an issue for you, continue to "Daily Routine" below]

If you haven't fully "come out," you may feel especially unable to fully share your grief with the world. You may be trying to resume work immediately following a death in order to avoid disclosure of your personal situation, or feel forced to lie to explain your absence or distress. If you're in this situation, it can be especially difficult and isolating to deal with your grief and pain in secret.

If the death was the result of an AIDS-related illness, the loss has likely been preceded by a long period of stress and worry as the illness took its toll. As the bereaved partner, you may already be exhausted when the additional shock and pain of the death occurs.

AIDS is, unfortunately, still a taboo subject in some parts of society. You may even be urged to maintain silence about the death by family members. Given the importance in the healing process of being able to express yourself, this can make life extremely difficult and can prolong the grieving process.

Parents and family members of the deceased may refuse to recognize the gay relationship and the critical role the surviving partner played in the deceased's life. This can result in significant challenges related to funeral arrangements, finances, etc.

Steps to take

Whether you are fully "out" or not, it's crucial to reach out for support and find opportunities to fully express your grief. Being able to express your pain is an important part of the healing process. As much as possible:

- Spend time with those who know your situation and can give you the support and care you need.
- If you have not yet "come out," contact a community support line or access support from people or services in the gay and lesbian community.

Daily routine

Immediately following the death of a loved one, most people feel disoriented, helpless and a little detached from life. When you've lost a partner, you're facing the additional challenge of a sudden and complete loss of your day-to-day routine. Building new routines can bring some structure back into your life and gradually help to develop a sense of stability.

Some people find it's helpful to write out a routine for each day, with mealtimes and times for exercise, cooking and shopping, etc. If this works for you, attach the schedule to your fridge or bathroom mirror, and

use it as a guide to get through each hour, each day, and eventually each week. Even if a formalized routine isn’t your thing, do try to:

- Aim for a regular bedtime.
- Try to eat at regular times every day.
- Switch on your favourite radio or TV channels—even if you feel you can't focus on anything that's going on, the company and familiarity they provide might be helpful.
- Though you may find it difficult to concentrate on work or other outside activities for a while, it can be helpful to gradually ease yourself back into a routine.
- If your employer is able to be flexible, perhaps you can discuss returning to work on reduced hours or days for a couple of weeks.

Give yourself permission to break your routine

- Routine is important—but so is flexibility. When you feel the need to throw all the rules out of the window and just weep, that's exactly what you should do.
- Be kind to yourself. Give yourself time to grieve.
- Don't be swayed by other people's views about what you should or shouldn't be feeling or doing right now. Grieve the way you need to grieve and be kind to yourself.

Practical challenges

The loss of a partner may involve some special challenges that may seem unimportant to other people but may be painfully difficult for you. We've gathered practical tips that have worked for some people in this situation. Again, remember there are no rules. Do what works best for you.

- **Cooking for one.** If you're now alone in the home, it can seem difficult or even pointless to cook for one. Buy some prepared single meals, prewashed salads, cold cuts and fruit to get you through the first few weeks. Or cook up larger meals and freeze them in individual portions that you can just pop in the microwave.
- **Eating alone.** Try to make an effort to sit down at mealtimes and eat properly. It's a habit that's worth getting into. You may find it difficult to sit down to a meal at the table you always shared with your partner. Some people find it's helpful to switch seats and sit where their late partner used to sit.
- **Keeping house.** Just because your partner vacuumed every day or washed the car every week, doesn't mean you have to. Be realistic about what has to be done and what can reasonably be left until a later date.
- **Money management.** If you are unfamiliar with household finances, ask a family member or close friend to sit down with you and show you what needs to be done. If you’re comfortable using the internet, many bills can now be paid on-line or via telephone banking or ATM bank machines. This can save considerable time and paperwork.

Ask for help

Many people will be glad to do anything they can to help you—but often don't know where or how to begin. Make it your responsibility to tell concerned friends or neighbours exactly what would be most helpful.

- Be specific. If you're finding it difficult to prepare food, ask a friend to bring some prepared meals from the deli or from their own freezer. If you need help sorting out the funeral, life insurance or a will, call on extended family or close friends.

- Get a friend or family member to help you notify credit card companies, banks and utility companies about your partner's death. They can discuss any changes to your financial situation with you.

- Ask a close friend or family member to help you gather up your partner’s belongings. Some people like to immediately remove these things; others prefer to store them away until they feel more able to deal with them.

- If housework, snow shovelling or walking the dog is simply beyond you right now, consider calling in an outside service or a neighbourhood student who'd appreciate some extra pocket money.

Seek out distractions

When you distract yourself, you don't take away the grief—nothing will do that except time. However, by slowly beginning to find new interests in life or things to look forward to, you can start to create moments of happiness that will gradually expand to fill more and more of both your time and your mind.

- If you have a garden, plant flowers for the summer or spring bulbs to herald the end of winter. If you don't have a garden, consider planting bulbs in pots inside.

- If you love animals and are prepared to take on the long-term responsibility, buy a kitten or puppy, or adopt an adult pet from your local animal shelter.

- Book a future vacation with friends.

- Book a day at a spa or a weekend at a cottage.

- Take lessons in something you've always wanted to learn.

- Sign up to volunteer for a cause that matters to you.

By finding ways to begin to fill your time, you'll eventually be able to fill your heart again.

Begin to take pride in your independent identity

Although any change takes time, you'll gradually adjust to the change in your identity from being part of a couple to a single person. Give yourself encouragement and recognition as you begin to make the shift, and take pride in the newly independent person you're becoming.

- Use positive “self-talk” to recognize your strengths and the effort you're investing to overcome challenges.

- Take pride in being independent.

- Invest in your single identity. Pursue interests you've never had a chance to spend time on, rearrange the furniture or redecorate to suit your personal tastes or visit places you've always wanted to explore.

- Tell yourself you can do it—and one day you'll realize that you have!

If you require further support, contact a professional or community organization who can provide you with additional information on bereavement and how to cope.