

Coping with the death of your same-sex partner

available in the community (for example at one of the LGBT centres). If you are struggling with your grief, please get support from an understanding counsellor, your GP or one of the gay and lesbian helplines or the LGBT helpline.

We may wish to protect our children from the pain that death and loss can bring – but this is not possible. They too have lost a significant person from their life and it is important that their loss and grief is acknowledged. Try to be open and honest with them and encourage them to talk about their feelings. Support is also available for them if you are concerned about how they are coping.

“It was important to me that people acknowledged how much I loved Sarah. She was so much more than just a partner and a friend; she was my soul mate. I had to accept that not everyone was comfortable with this. It meant a lot to me when my mother said she considered her a daughter-in-law.” Clare, 36 year old lesbian

What may help

- Try to get back to a routine as soon as possible.
- Take physical exercise - even a 10-minute walk every day.
- Choose your support wisely. Don't let other people tell you how to grieve. This is your grief and you know best how to express it.
- Remind yourself of what your partner brought to your life and remember that death ends a life not a relationship. Your partner will continue to be important to you.
- Know that with care, support and understanding, you can learn to adapt to this loss.

What doesn't help

- **Alcohol and drugs:** Try not to use alcohol, drugs or sleeping pills as ways of coping. While they may provide temporary relief, they are not a long-term solution. Talk to your doctor if you are having trouble sleeping or if you are struggling in your daily life.

Further resources

LGBT Helpline: 1890 929 539
www.lgbt.ie

Dublin Lesbian Line: (01) 872 9911

Gay Switchboard Dublin: 01-872 1055

LGBT centres & groups: details available at www.lgbt.ie

Bereaved children and adolescents

Barnardos: (01) 453 0355 **Callsave:** 1850 222 300

Books

Hull McCormack, J. (2005) *Grieving; a beginner's guide*

Silva, D.W. (2000) *A Grief Recovery Guide for Gay Men*

Walter, C.A. (2003) *The loss of a Life Partner; Narratives of the Bereaved*

Whipple, V. (2006) *Lesbian Widows: Invisible Grief*

All of the above books are available on public loan from the Thérèse Brady library at the Irish Hospice Foundation. Phone (01) 679 3188.

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“When Jack died I felt like my heart would break, nobody knew what he meant to me.”

John, 51 year old gay man

The death of your partner is one of the biggest losses you will face in your life. How you deal with this loss and how you grieve will depend on many things, including:

- whether your partner's death was sudden,
- whether you were 'out' to friends and family,
- what support you have available,
- whether over time, you are able to make sense of what has happened and begin to live your life again.

A major bereavement is not something you get over, but learning to adapt to this life event is one of the key factors in coping with a partner's death. Adapting to life without your partner is a process and it takes time. Every loss brings its own difficulties. For instance, a death following a long illness brings different challenges from a sudden, unexpected death when there has been no time to say goodbye. The death of your partner early in your relationship can be traumatic because your hopes and dreams of your future together have been taken away. Likewise, a couple who have been together for a long time may find it difficult to imagine living in the world without their partner.

As you grieve, you may experience many different emotions. At first, you might feel numbed and shocked - even if the death was expected. Later, you might feel angry that your life has changed so much. Sometimes you might be completely overcome with sadness at the unfairness of it all.

The process of bereavement

Thinking about bereavement in stages may help you to understand what you are experiencing, but don't expect your grief to follow any set course. It may be useful to think of it as a train journey where there are many stations along the way. Whether you get off the train at a particular station

and how long you wait at that station depends on your own particular journey. There is no right or wrong way to make this journey and no set amount of time it should take.

The last station on the grief journey is very important because it brings you to the point where you are able to make sense of the death. This may be because you are able to say 'I am glad my partner is no longer suffering' or you might find comfort through your spiritual beliefs. Or perhaps you come to understand and accept that the world is an unpredictable place with no guarantees about anything.

All relationships have their ups and downs and you may get stuck in the 'if only's' when your partner dies. If you have feelings of guilt, talk to someone you trust about these feelings. It is easy looking back to feel guilty for things you did or said. Talking to someone you trust might help you to realise that maybe you're being too hard on yourself.

Dealing with loneliness

Your biggest day-to-day challenge may be trying to deal with the loneliness following the loss of your close relationship. It is important to acknowledge to yourself just how much your partner meant to you. If other people don't understand how deep your feelings were for your partner, they may say or do things that seem harsh or insensitive. It is important for you to hold on to what your partner and your relationship meant to you. Being with your partner has helped to make you the person you are. The life you shared with your partner has influenced how you think about yourself and how you view the world. Your partner will continue to be important in your life even after their death.

The death of your partner is not just about the loss of their physical presence. It also means the loss of a companion, soul mate, friend and lover. There might be practical things too that your partner did that you miss. For instance, they might have paid the bills, done the cooking, sent the Christmas cards and so on. Sometimes these losses don't

hit home for some time after the death, so it is important that you continue to have good support in the second and third year after the death. For example, until the time comes to plan a holiday or renew your car insurance, you may not realise this was something you depended on your partner to take care of. Sometimes the people who offer you support early on don't understand this and may expect you to be 'over it'. Please remember that loss is not something you get over; it is something you learn to live with.

Bereavement and Families

Grief is a natural reaction to a major loss and most bereaved partners find their way through their grief with the support of family and friends and the people they work with. Many same-sex couples and civil partners have good support from their families and this will continue to be important for the bereaved person after the loss of their partner.

It can sometimes be hard to know how families will react to the loss. Some families may have found it difficult to understand and support your same-sex relationship, but they understand the human feelings of loss and can offer support to the person left behind. In other cases, families may withdraw their support after the death (perhaps due to lack of understanding) and you may be left feeling that your loss is not as legitimate as that of someone in a heterosexual relationship. This is sometimes called 'disenfranchised grief' and is experienced by some lesbian and gay people who have lost their partner.

There may also be disagreements about last wishes, property and belongings, which can add to the burden and isolation of the surviving partner particularly if you and your partner did not have a civil partnership. Sometimes, the bereaved partner is faced with deciding whether to 'come out' just as they are trying to cope with the loss. If you find yourself in this situation, make sure that you talk it over with someone you trust and don't rush into anything. If the people you normally turn to for support and advice cannot offer you what you need please know that there is support