

Coping with the Death of Your Same-Sex Partner

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

John, 51

The death of your partner or spouse 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.

Adapting to life without your partner or spouse is a process and it takes time. Every loss brings its own difficulties. 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 each other.

The process of bereavement

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 death is an integral part of life. You may come to a time where you think of your loved one more often with love than with pain.

All relationships have their ups and downs and you may get stuck in the ‘if only’ when your partner dies. If you have feelings of guilt, talk to someone you trust about these feelings. 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 or spouse 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. Being with your partner has helped to make you the person you are. The life you shared together 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 spouse or 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. 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.



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To die and grieve well wherever the place



Bereavement and families

Many same-sex couples and civil partners have good support from their families, friends and the people they work with and this will continue to be important for the bereaved person after the loss of their partner.

However, 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 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 'disenfranchised grief' and is experienced by some lesbian and gay people who have lost their partner. It is important for you to hold on to what your partner and your relationship meant to you.

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 or were not married. Sometimes, the bereaved partner is faced with deciding 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 to someone you trust and don't rush into anything. There is also support available in the community. 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.



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.
- Talk to your doctor if you are having trouble sleeping or if you are struggling in your daily life.

Further Resources

LGBT: www.lgbt.ie Helpline: 1890 929539

Dublin Lesbian Line: www.dublinlesbianline.ie Helpline: (01) 872 9911

Gay Switchboard Ireland: (01) 872 1055

Bereavement Support Line

Freephone 1800 80 70 77. Available Monday to Friday 10am-1pm. In partnership with HSE.

Further suggested reading is available from the Irish Hospice Foundation's Thérèse Brady Library, library@hospicefoundation.ie

Produced by Irish Hospice Foundation Bereavement Education & Resource Centre
www.bereaved.ie
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