

WHEN I LOST MY HUSBAND....
by Sharon Ohnemus

When I lost my husband I lost part of myself. During my marriage, I had nearly forgotten who I am because I was part of "we." Now, again, I have had to become whole, in and of myself. No longer are there two pairs of eyes, two pairs of arms, two hearts entwined, two souls enmeshed. Like the painful separation of Siamese twins there is a critical period after the surgery where survival is questionable -- followed by a long period of healing.

When I lost my husband I lost my best friend. Now who will share my secrets? Who's going to like me in spite of my faults? Who will bolster my ego, make me laugh when I'd rather pout or cry, be my sounding board and not tell or get angry? Who's going to tell it to me straight because I need to be told!

When I lost my husband, I lost my life's companion. Now who will go with me to the kid's games and plays and concerts? Who will take vacations and weekend trips, or that cruise or European tour, with me? Who's going to share my silence when fishing or sitting on the porch? Who's going to grow old with me?

When I lost my husband I lost my confidante. Who else will care what I'm crying about? Who's going to encourage me to go for that job I want, to lose weight, to accept that leadership position offered by my civic club? Who's going to know how I really feel and what's important to me?

When I lost my husband, I lost my dream of the future. Now there will be no retirement travel, no cruise, no vacation in a motor home, no visit to far away relatives, no holidays spent as a couple with the kids and grandkids. Births, weddings, graduations, and birthdays will not be celebrated together as we had planned, but alone.

When I lost my husband, I lost my business partner. My financial picture is out of focus and my budget is out of balance. Now there is no one with whom I can discuss large purchases or investments or insurance. Credit cards and legal documents issued in my name have become a confusing world of irritation. Now there is no second income to support the life style we had built together or the future we had planned.

When I lost my husband, I lost a counselor. He was the voice of reason when I was unreasonable, rational when I was irrational. Who now will offer me other avenues of choice when I can only see one way -- or no way at all? Who will care enough to help me help myself? Will anyone else advise me to hone my skills and refine my talents?

When I lost my husband, I lost a caretaker. Who will clean the gutters, fix the leaky faucet, put on the storm windows?

When I lost my husband, I lost a caregiver. If I have the flu or a headache, who now will say, "Don't worry, honey. I'll fix supper," then quietly steal in when I'm asleep (or he thinks I'm asleep), touch my forehead, kiss me on the cheek or hold me comfortingly?

When I lost my husband, I lost my identity as half of a couple. Frequenting places we used to go together is painful. Social occasions where there are couples make me feel awkward and they emphasize my aloneness. Family outings or get-togethers are fraught with unsaid words, silences, and torturing memories.

When I lost my husband, I lost my social circle. His friends aren't my friends anymore. Our friends can't get used to only one of us. My friends are uncomfortable when his name is mentioned or past events are recalled. Invitations to join them come less and less frequently. I must either become an involuntary recluse, or form a new nucleus of associates.

When I lost my husband, I lost my rock, my anchor, my safe harbor. There's no one waiting now when I leave the work place. Who's going to help me put my shattered self-esteem back together? Who will tell me to reshape my priorities and regain my perspective so that I'm ready the next day to challenge the stormy sea again?

When I lost my husband, I lost my lover. I don't wake now to find us in each other's arms. There's no one to reach out and touch, or put cold feet on, or tell to "turn over and stop snoring." There's no regular breathing to signal familiar surroundings and security and calm my nightmares. The cord of physical and emotional intimacy has been ripped apart.

Finding my world void of all these roles once filled by one person is so overwhelming and frightening that depression and lethargy can't help but become my companions. This is the mourning time. The grief must flow. Only afterward -- inch by inch, hour by hour, person by person -- will these areas begin to be filled. Only I will know whether this can be done in three months, or a year, or a lifetime.

Realizing that grieving is an active participation process, I would like to share some positive attitudes which I have found helpful in the healing process:

- Individual grieving is as unique as individual fingerprints. Listen to your heart and find your own way; another person's process may not work for you.
- Without explanation or apology, methodically reorganize your life, examine values and priorities, according to what you NOW feel is important.
- Take care of legal and financial matters at hand and, where necessary, revamp plans for your future. Nothing builds confidence in the ability to cope like "taking care of business," and forcing yourself to reconstruct your life when you'd rather let it cave in.
- Don't isolate yourself. Talking with others is a prime outlet for grief. You may choose a neighbor, a friend, a family member, or a professional counselor; and most communities have support groups organized for specific loss situations. Attending a movie, a dinner out, or a sporting event helps you to rejoin others in the cycle of living.
- Make your idle alone-time an enjoyable, profitable pursuit with hobbies or even a part-time career at home.
- Revitalize plans you may have put on the back burner long ago. Perhaps you once wanted to travel, start a business, go to school, or relocate in another area. Put these plans into action, and give yourself a daily goal to work toward.
- And don't forget to indulge yourself in ways that are emotionally, spiritually, and physically healthy. If this calls for self-improvement projects (a new hairdo, wardrobe, exercise routine or aerobics class) allow yourself that luxury.

Remember, your "life partner" would have wanted you to stay active in life.

Note: This essay was written by Sharon Ohnemus after the death of her husband, Ronald, in September 1986. Just over a year later, Sharon died from a brain aneurysm. Sharon's mother published this essay.