



3 Things to Consider When Grieving the Death of an Ex-Spouse

Whether you experience intense grief or are not affected at all, there are things you should consider following the death of an ex-spouse.

By Wendi Schuller

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Going through a divorce encompasses the stages of grief. There may be anger or signs of depression during divorce. One may be in denial about the whole process, thus delaying the sessions. One mourns losses — identity, lifestyle, or losing some mutual friends. It takes time getting through the grief process with divorce and moving on. When the death of an ex-spouse occurs on top of this, this grief cycle can be reactivated again.

The Reactivation of the Grieving Process

Even if the former spouse is a dim recollection, their death can trigger a myriad of emotions. It can start one on a trip down Memory Lane with rehashing both the good and troubling ones. Shock may be the first reaction. Take a pause in your busy life to acknowledge and then process these mixed emotions. Pour out your feelings to friends over lattes, get some fresh air with a walk in a leafy area, or release tension through physical activities. There are no “shoulds” – “I should feel sad,” “I should have done,” etc. You did what you felt was best at that time. Whatever you are feeling is fine. In some cases, the death of a former spouse brought up the issue of abandonment all over again, as it had with divorce.

Other folks I interviewed claimed that they felt absolutely nothing upon hearing about their former partner’s demise. It felt impersonal, as if it was someone in the news who had died. Their divorce was behind them and their ex had not been in their thoughts for a long time. Three women who had divorced abusive husbands felt a sense of relief when these men died. It was closure for a traumatic time in their lives, and they no longer had to worry about bumping into these toxic former spouses.

People can be devastated when learning about their former spouse’s passing. This death firmly closes the door to fantasies of reuniting when one has carried a glimmer of hope for their ex’s return. They cried, screamed, and vented to friends about losing this person a second time.

My friend Gretchen and her husband had different ideas of how to spend the Empty Nest years. She dreamed of Paris and other exotic locales and he of lounging at home. Other issues bubbled up as well, which led to divorce. She had harbored the idea that at some point, they would get back together. It took Gretchen three years to accept Don’s death and go through the grief cycle. She pulled away from friends and wallowed in self-pity. Gretchen moved across country to a charming seaside town near her parents. This jolted her out of her misery and she reconnected with friends and joined various groups. She met a fantastic guy in her dining club and enlarged her social circle.

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1. Helping Your Children Cope with Grief

When one has children, they require support when grieving for a parent. This is challenging when you need extra support too. When you feel depleted, ask a relative or friend to listen to your child. Have them spend time with your kid and do something fun. This is great for the wee ones and you get some space to mourn. If you feel too frazzled to do all of your tasks, think of some short-cuts. Tell your parents that you and the kids are available to have dinner with them. Feel free to pick up healthy take-away meals at a deli.

2. Determining the Benefits You're Entitled To

Talk to your financial advisor to determine what personal and government benefits you are entitled to receive. A co-worker emphasizes this point and receives \$10,000 per year from her deceased ex-husband's social security. When experiencing grief, it removes a burden when not having to worry about finances. My divorce attorney stipulated in our decree that my higher-earning spouse had to have a life insurance policy that covered maintenance and child support in case he died.

3. Getting Away

However you are feeling about your ex-spouse's death is OK. If stuck in despair, perhaps see a professional, if even for one session. Consider getting away and having an adventure in a far-flung place to banish lingering melancholy. A vacation can be rejuvenating.