

Complicated grief after the Loss of a Spouse or Partner

It is very difficult to lose a deeply-loved life partner. Romantic partners are often our most important source of comfort and support. They are people who share our achievements and our happiness. They soothe us and help us problem-solve when things are hard and we do the same for them. In other words, life partners take care of each other in a special way.

Loss of such a person can trigger intense feelings of grief. About a million people lose a spouse or partner each year in the United States, and there are currently about 11 million widowed older adults in the country. Despite these large numbers, widowhood is often a lonely and very painful experience.

There are many reasons why it is so difficult to lose a romantic partner. For example, coming home to an empty house, having a feeling of deep longing for the comforting companionship or the warmth and pleasure of a loved one's touch, or missing the person so much that it feels like physical pain. Bereavement may bring marked curtailment of social life because of not being invited to events with other couples, or finding these events too uncomfortable to attend. The loss might trigger feelings of being cheated or robbed of dreams or plans for the future. Nevertheless, in spite of the difficulties, most people find a way to endure the painful experiences and restore the capacity for joy and satisfaction in their lives. Some people don't.

If there is something troubling about when, how, or why the death occurred, or if something occurs after the death that is troubling, a bereaved person's attention can be captured, diverting them from coming to terms with the death and leaving them stuck in acute grief. Some bereaved people believe that they can't find a pathway forward into what seems like a dark and menacing future without their loved one. Others feel that grieving intensely is the only way to honor the person who died, or the only way to stay connected to that person. When issues like these take hold, acute grief can go on and on with little respite. This is complicated grief.