

Three Suggestions for Widows & Widowers

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There are so many losses and so much to grieve when one's spouse dies. Included in the losses for many widows and widowers is the loss of the person with whom they shared a bed. With the bed-sharing companion no longer there one loses the feelings of safety when in bed together, conversations while in bed, partner warmth, feelings of not being alone, and the routine that makes it easier to go to sleep. Perhaps these losses are part of what underlies the sleep problems that many widowed people have. Every person's situation is different, but here are three suggestions for widows and widowers that might help with getting a good night's sleep and feeling a bit more at peace.

Maintain the Routine

A number of widows and widowers I have interviewed have talked about keeping the bed-sharing routine. Before going to bed they might still watch the television programs they used to watch with their partner, even programs that never really liked. They might continue to sleep on the same side of the bed they slept on when they were bed sharing. And they might continue to keep things the way they were when their spouse and they shared the bed--how many blankets they have on the bed, the thermostat setting, the routine of reading a bit or watching a bit of television before lights out, having a night light on, and so on. Maintaining the routine can be a sweet way of staying connected with the spouse, and it also can be a way to keep on getting a good night's sleep.

Keep Up Communication with the Deceased Spouse

Some widows and widowers I have interviewed continue to communicate with their spouse who died. One widow talked about the long and intense conversation she had with her husband the night after his accidental death. When she entered into her bedroom that night, she sensed that he was in the room. She quickly closed the door to keep him in the room. She lay down in bed and told him how angry she was that he had gotten himself into the accident. She told him how good their time together had been for her.

I don't know if her talking with him continued after that night. But I know a widower who every night at bedtime communicates with his deceased wife in great detail about his day, his love for her, and things he remembers fondly about her. He says he doesn't know whether she receives those messages, but he hopes she does. And it's very important to him to keep on trying to communicate with her. I have also interviewed widows and widowers who were sure their deceased spouse received their messages and sometimes replied--for example, in the widow's or widower's dreams or with some special sign. So I suggest that, if it feels right to do, a widow or widower might write things, say things aloud, or say things in their mind to the spouse who has died. And making that part of the routine of going to be bed or first being in bed might be especially valuable.

Replace the Physical Contact

Losing a bed-sharing companion, one loses the physical contact. Some widows and widowers I have interviewed have arranged their sleeping situation so they feel less alone physically. A common way to do that is to arrange pillows or a single extra-long pillow so that one can feel the contact (and soon the warmth) of the pillow arrangement. Some widows have a dog or cat sleep with them. And of course some widows or widowers find another adult with whom to share a bed at least now and then.