

## *New research reveals that common conceptions about dealing with loss of a spouse are all wrong*

by Ruth Davis Konigsberg

**L**osing a husband or wife is a devastating experience that many of us will have to face. About 40 percent of women and 13 percent of men who are 65 and older are widowed, according to latest census figures.



Until recently, very little sound research existed about how we live on after a loved one has died. But in the past decade, social scientists with unprecedented access to large groups of widows and widowers have uncovered five surprising truths about losing a spouse.

**We oscillate.** For years, we've been told that grief comes in five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. If we were to diagram those stages, the emotional trajectory would look something like a large capital W, with two major low points signifying anger or depression, and the top of the last upward leg of the W signifying acceptance. But when psychologist Toni Bisconti of the University of Akron asked recent widows to fill out daily questionnaires for three months, vast fluctuations occurred from one day to the next. A widow might feel anxious and blue one day, only to feel lighthearted and cheerful the next. In other words, we don't grieve in stages at all, but oscillate rapidly. Over time, those swings diminish in both frequency and intensity until we reach a level of emotional adjustment.

**Grief is not forever.** One of the most important new findings has shown that for most of us, grief is a severe — but self-limiting — condition, not a permanent state. In one study of older men and women who had lost spouses, George A. Bonanno, a clinical psychologist at Teachers College, Columbia University, found that the core symptoms of grief — anxiety, depression, shock, intrusive thoughts — had lifted by six months after the loss for 50 percent of the participants. Smaller groups took up to 18 months or three years to resume normal functioning. Loss is forever, but thankfully, acute grief is not.

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**Loss is harder for men.** For years, clinicians have been operating under the assumption that women grieve harder and longer than men. In 2001, psychologists Wolfgang and Margaret Stroebe (a husband-and-wife team) decided to examine all the existing research and came to the surprising conclusion that, after taking into account the higher rate of depression in the overall female population, men actually suffer more from being bereaved. We might be under the impression that widows despair more, but that's because there are many more widows to observe.

**You don't necessarily need counseling.** Often, well-meaning friends and relatives will urge you to attend a support group, or go to see a grief counselor. Although taking such steps might make you feel better, it's certainly not a requirement for healing. According to a 2008 survey, most grief seems to go away on its own. Counseling can be helpful, however, for people whose grief has already lasted a long time and who are likely suffering from a condition called "complicated grief."

**Humor can heal.** In 2008, psychologist Dale Lund of California State University surveyed 292 recently bereaved men and women 50 and older, and he found that 75 percent reported finding humor and laughter in their daily lives, and at levels much higher than they had expected. Other research has shown that being able to draw on happy memories of the deceased helps you heal — those who are able to smile when describing their relationship to their husband or wife six months after the loss were happier and healthier 14 months out than those who could only speak of the deceased with sadness, fear and anger. As hard as it might be, try to focus on good memories and feelings about your relationship, as it is the positive emotions that can protect your psyche and help you find serenity.

*Ruth Davis Konigsberg is the author of [The Truth About Grief: The Myth of Its Five Stages](#) and [The New Science of Loss](#).*

