

## THE AFTER A DEATH SERIES

# When A Partner Dies



*You gotta walk that lonesome valley  
You gotta walk it by yourself  
Nobody else can walk it for you  
You gotta walk it by yourself.  
– Appalachian folk tune*

The world is made up of partnerships from government to business, from professional to personal. For you, it is likely your partner was someone you loved very much. When your partner dies, you join the group walking that lonesome valley. In our society, you are likely to experience what Dr. Ken Doka defined as: *Disenfranchised Grief: when the relationship is not recognized, the loss is not acknowledged and the griever is excluded from ritual and family.*

If your partner whom you loved and will miss forever was of the same sex, whether or not you had a romantic, sexual relationship, some people will refuse to admit your love was honest, loyal and sincere. There may be conspicuous silence from family and others. It can make grieving even harder than it already is. Hurt and frustration may be added to all the emotions that come with any loss of a love. You will probably also experience:

- Sadness and sorrow
- Anger and guilt
- Anxiety and worry
- A sense of loss and helplessness and confusion
- Loneliness and isolation

It is not unusual, if your relationship was a same-sex one, to find yourself in a situation where you are excluded from funeral planning and family ritual. It is not unusual for two funerals to take place; one held by a family who has re-scripted the life of their son or daughter or sibling, and one where the gay community rallies in loving ritual for friend and partner. If this is your case, you can create your own memorial service with others who

loved your partner. If you have been hurt by exclusion or rejection, try forgiving the ones doing the hurting. Remember they are grieving, too. And know that forgiveness helps you more than the person whom you forgive. A great quote goes, “Holding a grudge is like drinking poison every day and hoping the other person dies.” You are a good person. Let everyone know it.

Harold Ivan Smith, author of the new book, *A Partnered Grief*, tells of leading a support group in which there were both heterosexual and homosexual grievers. During the last session, an elderly widow took hold of a gay participant’s hand and said to the group, “I’ve come to realize he loved his man just as much as I loved mine. He loved his man better than some of my widow friends ever loved theirs. It’s love that really counts in life and in death, too.”

There is a loss of identity when a relationship ends. You may be feeling like a bumper car in an amusement park. You get slammed and bumped by all kinds of questions:

- Who am I *now*?
- Who am I *without* my partner?
- Who am I without a *relationship*?
- Doesn’t *anyone* understand?

There may be a conspicuous silence from friends and family. If yours was a sexual relationship there may be disapproval and snide comments from some people. When this happens, take a deep breath and tell yourself again, “They don’t understand.” *They* may not understand, but *someone* will.

No matter what kind of partnership you had, there are things you can do to help yourself grow through this experience:

- **Recognize the uniqueness of your grief**

Just as the FBI knows the fingerprint of your right thumb is not like any other thumb in the world, your relationship with your partner was

also not like any other. Your grief is as personal as your fingerprint and as important as any other grief.

- **Find a grief companion**

Find someone – a bereavement counselor, a close friend, a fellow griever or a support group where you can learn ways to cope with your feelings and share your loss. Someone who cares about you gave you this short article. Ask that person for referrals or to be the buddy to whom you can talk freely.

- **Embrace your sorrow and give it a voice**

Network with friends who know something about grief and with whom you can talk about your partner. Share stories and memories. Write into a personal journal – draw in it, create poems, write a letter to your partner. Plant a tree or garden that means something to you. One young woman whose partner had a wild, wonderful sense of humor agreed to plant a bed of daffodils after her partner died. It was to be in the shape of a human brain. The partner had died of a brain tumor. When friends mentioned the creative, interesting shape, the surviving partner told of her planting promise.

As one young widow of a soldier killed in Iraq said, “Gay people and singles living together have a flip-side grief to the military widow and widower. You’re told not to grieve because your relationship didn’t count. We’re told not to grieve because the relationship that counted was with the country, not the family. Our grief is disenfranchised, too.”

Your grief is precious because it speaks about love and caring; loneliness and sorrow. Grief is the price we pay for love. The truly bereaved are those who never love. Never forget this love you shared.

A Caring Gift to you from: \_\_\_\_\_