Loneliness After the Death of a Life Partner

Here's a simple fact: **Almost every marriage that doesn't end in divorce ends in widowhood.** Geriatric advocates particularly should pay more attention to this fact.

Widowhood, of course, can occur among young as well as old adults. The average age is 59. But it is, of course, more common among older adults. In 2022, there were 11.5 million women and 3.7 million men in the United States who were widowed—most of them 65 or older. That's a lot of people, and the number will grow as the population of old people increases over the next few decades.

The loss of a life partner results in grief, a complex experience of which loneliness is a major part.

Loneliness! Sounds simple enough to deal with, right?

If you're lonely, spend time with other people.

But it's not nearly so simple. In my experience, there are two types of loneliness after being widowed. One kind of loneliness can be reduced by being with people you enjoy. That's the loneliness that is the result of isolation. But there is also loneliness that is the loss of the core connection with a life partner. It is the absence where there was constant and committed presence. It is the silence where there was conversation. It is the lack of knowing touches. It is the emptiness of your bed. It is a void.

You can feel this kind of loneliness when you are alone. But you can also feel it when you are with other people.

For example, I sometimes feel this loneliness when I'm alone and miss my wife. When I want to talk with her or just be quietly together. When I feel the loss of what she and I created together over nearly 50 years of marriage: a home, a family, a shared circle of friends, a life of helping others and of social advocacy, frequent travels around the world, and more.

But sometimes this sense of loss and loneliness happens when I'm with other people. For example, when I'm with other couples and become acutely aware that **I am now one when I used to be two**. Or when I feel the continuity of other people's lives in contrast to the discontinuity of my own. Or when I'm with people that my wife and I used to be with together and I feel her absence. I am not the same person without her, and sometimes, when I'm with the people we used to share, I feel that with deep sadness.

What is it that makes the loneliness of loss different from the loneliness of isolation? The research literature contains a number of efforts to differentiate types of loneliness. For example, a 2021 article in The Gerontologist distinguishes "social, emotional, and existential loneliness." "Social loneliness," it says, "originates from the absence of a broader group of contacts or an engaging social network. Emotional loneliness originates from the absence of an intimate figure or a close emotional attachment." "Existential loneliness" the article continues, "is the result of a … separation related to the nature of existence and, in particular, a lack of meaning in life."

I don't think that these concepts adequately capture the kind of loneliness that frequently follows the loss of a longtime life partner. Several researchers suggest that the loneliness of loss is existential loneliness, i.e., feeling alone, adrift, and without meaning in a vast universe. But I think this is far more common among young people feeling their way into becoming adults than among mature or old people, who are more likely to have committed relationships and a sense of being settled in their world. Emotional loneliness, by emphasizing lack of intimacy, comes closer to capturing the sense of the emptiness of a lost, long-term relationship. But it is not just a lack of

intimacy; it is the loss of a shared life and the shattering of a shared reality that create the emotional emptiness of a lost life partnership.

It is tough to capture the loneliness of loss in words.

It is even more difficult, I think, to figure out what can be done to help at both policy and personal levels.

A research project at Monash University in Australia, one of the very few studies of the loss of life partners, concludes: "**Interventions should move beyond simply encouraging social interactions**. Instead, they should focus on helping the bereaved form a **new sense of identity and purpose**. This might include programs that support widowed individuals in exploring new interests, hobbies, or roles within their communities." They further conclude that it is important to "foster emotional connections rather than just social interaction."

Researchers have also suggested that the healthcare system could be more helpful. One prominent recommendation is to screen for loneliness and then do "social prescribing." That would mean making referrals to social programs that their patients might connect with, including senior centers, social clubs, houses of worship, classes, and more. Screening, it's important to say, can be as simple and straightforward as asking recent widows and widowers whether they are lonely, whether they are seeking intimacy, whether they are finding opportunities for warm, caring interactions with people.

These strike me as good, albeit difficult to achieve, policy recommendations. But I think it's also important to think about what can be done to help at a personal level.

For example, I have been very lonely since my wife died—even though I am extremely busy and have lots of contact with people I enjoy. What helps me most are moments of intimacy with

someone I care about and who cares about me. Given the frequency of remarriage, many widows apparently achieve not only such moments, but long-term caring and commitment.

Short of new loving relationships, what helps me most, believe it or not, is a big hug. Not very scientific, I suppose, but I'm telling you that it is absolutely the best thing there is when I'm feeling alone and emotionally empty. It is also helpful when people will let me talk about what I'm feeling and listen, just listen. I don't need their advice and I don't need to know that they have had similar experiences. I need to feel that they care about me.

The other experiences that help me are my artistic efforts: my photography and playing jazz. At their best, these connect me with a rich cultural history, a community where I have a sense of belonging, and a transcendent reality. Other people find this antidote to loneliness in religious faith and in other experiences that take them beyond themselves.

So, even though the loneliness of a lost life partner is unavoidably painful and cannot be overcome just by being with people you enjoy, new lives do emerge for many widowed people.

Unfortunately, promoting the development of deep emotional connections that can counter the pain of a shattered self has not been much on the radar for geriatric advocacy, even though it is the most fundamental need for millions of widowed Americans. Those who care about the fate of old people should really pay more attention to it.