

10 SECRETS TO WIDOWHOOD

Welcome to the sisterhood. The club no one wants to join. It's also the club no one wants to talk about – not widows, not family, not friends, not the stranger you just met at the store whose eyes bug out when you tell them your husband died three months ago. This is a problem. It's why widows feel isolated, alone, depressed. It's why it makes a bad situation so much worse.

Screw that. This happened and avoiding the topic doesn't change the fact that your husband is dead. Our mission: shine a big old spotlight on what widows experience. And we aren't going to tip toe around the topic either.

Before we dive into the ten secrets, let's talk about "grief". Search for books on widowhood and the vast majority are "grief" books. The authors are either someone who isn't a widow telling you how to deal with it or a widow writing about her experience. We've read a lot of them. Thanks for the effort folks, but they're not very helpful. It's time to get real.

Widowhood is not simply "grief". Your husband's death is like someone setting a bomb off in your kitchen. Too graphic? How else do you describe the destruction of your relationship with your husband. The loss of the intimacy you experienced with your partner, and if you were lucky your best friend. If you have children, your role as a parent just got decimated. Your relationship with your family – and with your husband's family – changes. You're going to lose some friends. You'll gain some new ones. Your financials just got upended. The icing on the cake is that you and your husband's collection of plans and dreams for the future just become a blank slate.

So are you sad? Are you grieving? Are you depressed? Are you uncertain? Are you overwhelmed? Are you scared shitless? Welcome to the sisterhood.

1. LOOKIN' OUT FOR #1

There's a reason they refer to stress as the silent killer. It wreaks havoc on a person physically, mentally and emotionally. To say new widows are "stressed" is a gross understatement.

- You are number one. Practice self-care.
- Widow Fog. Every widow experiences it to some degree. It's a clinically documented reaction to the extreme stress. It's your body's defensive mechanism to the overwhelming stimuli bombarding you. You can only take so much.
- Find what works for you, but you need some calm and clarity. Exercise, take a walk. Go to work or volunteer for the distraction. Go to a populated park, shopping center, restaurant, etc... where you can be around people for the social connection, but you don't have to talk to anyone. Avoid alcohol and drugs unless prescribed by a qualified professional.

2. FIND YOUR GUARDIAN ANGEL

In the days and weeks after your husband's death, most widows are so overwhelmed that they forget stuff. They forget to eat. They forget to pay a bill. They forget an appointment. If a family member or friend offers to help keep track of things, accept it. If no one offers, ask someone.

- Let your angel help you make funeral arrangements so they can ask questions and take notes.
- Let your angel review your email or answer phone calls and texts for important information or to respond on your behalf.
- Let your angel look over your calendar for appointments to cancel or reschedule as appropriate.
- Let your angel review your medications to make sure you follow your prescription schedule and reorder.
- Let your angel review the checking account, credit card statement and bills to make sure things get paid.

3. I THINK I'M GOING CRAZY

In addition to the Widows Fog and the grief, you're overwhelmed by the sheer volume of decisions and questions. You're bombarded by other people who want answers and there's no end to the things you are concerned about.

- Thanks to the stress you're experiencing, you're going to forget things.
- You're going to get frustrated.
- You're going to get angry sometimes.
- Write things down. It helps. Who needs what and when.

4. WIDOWS CAN TALK TO THE DEAD

Talk to a widow. If she's honest, she's talked to her husband. She's probably cursed at him, too.

- It's completely normal to start talking to your husband, remember he's gone, and then feel awful.
- There will be any number of things that trigger you to miss your husband. Places, sounds, smells, etc... can all spark his memory. Often it also leads to sobbing. It's normal and ok. Own it.
- Many widows report feeling their husband's presence. Whether it's a guiding signal or just a feeling that overcomes you. Real? Who cares? If you feel it, it's real.
- Write a letter to your husband. Talk to him. Tell him how you feel. Whether it's pen and paper or in a computer. Be honest; let the feeling flow. Express yourself. You'll feel better.

5. TELL ME HOW YOU REALLY FEEL

There's no end to the stupid/insensitive/clueless things people say to widows. They're all well intentioned, of course. But you're going to hear some doozies. Widows learn to brush things off.

- Some people say things thinking they're being helpful. "He's in a better place"; "You're so lucky you travelled when did."
- Some people will say some truly stupid things: "Are you going to go back to your maiden name?"
- Some people will say nothing and act like nothing happened.
- Some people will use your loss as an excuse to talk about themselves.

6. SLOW YOUR ROLL

When people feel like things are out of control - say like when your husband dies - it's perfectly natural to want to try and create a feeling of control by doing things. This can be a big mistake. We tell widows to give it at least a year before making any irreversible decisions. They don't seem to believe us when we tell them that you cannot imagine where you will be a year or two or three after your husband dies. After a few years, they get it.

- Don't give money away.
- Don't sell your house in the first few months unless you really can't afford to stay there.
- Don't move; don't buy a second home; don't undertake a large home improvement.
- Don't buy some investment you can't sell immediately with no strings attached (i.e. life insurance and annuities).

7. A LITTLE HELP!

Generally, in a marriage, there is a division of labor. You have two people working together to get things done. When one spouse dies, the surviving spouse gets everything loaded up on their plate. It's just another way widows get overwhelmed. Don't be afraid to ask for help.

- Auto and home repairs – We often hear from widows that one of the things they dislike is dealing with repair people. Their husbands took care of that task. Consider enlisting the help of a son, brother, father, etc...
- Grief support – Most widows don't seek out support groups, for whatever reason. We will say, though, that widows who do find other widows to talk to benefit from the experience. Your widow sisters know what you're going through and there won't be the awkwardness non-widows exhibit when interacting with you.
- Grief therapy – After a while, even your most understanding friends and family will get overloaded by the "heaviness" of what you are dealing with. When you need more focused listening and advice, it's time to bring in a professional grief therapist.

8. DON'T BECOME A BAG LADY

You are responsible for your financial security for the rest of your life. Don't muck it up.

- Elderly women, often widows, make up the majority of people living in poverty.
- Be very careful about who you trust with your money. Always question their intentions and how they get paid. Avoid commissioned salespeople.
- Don't hire an amateur to do a professional's job. In other words, don't take financial advice from a brother/uncle/son/family friend who does their own investing. Let them keep their mistakes to themselves.
- Stupid housing decisions can really hurt you. Don't buy a second house or bigger house. Don't stay in a house you can't afford to keep.
- Understand where your income will come from and reduce expenses.

9. TAKE MY MONEY PLEASE

The vultures start circling in the days after your husband dies. There are lots of people poised to take advantage of widows.

- Family – you might have a family member with their hand out who offers to help you. It can be hard to say no. In most cases, it's a family member who takes advantage of a vulnerable person.
- Salespeople – don't be pressured into making a decision to purchase something. Quite often things are not as dire as the salesperson implies. Get a second opinion. Insist on a written and detailed quote or proposal. Ask a trusted friend to review it.
- Companionship – unfortunately, one of the toughest parts about widowhood is the loneliness. You and your husband did things together – even if it's just watching tv. Widows look for companionship and are often found by scammers. Guys who are more than happy to spend some time with you. And then they start asking for you to buy them stuff.

10. THE PURGE

What to do with your husband's stuff... And when? Everyone has stuff that is special to them and, quite often, worthless to almost everyone else. Does it mean you didn't love your husband if you give away (or sell) his collection of model cars? Or his old tennis racket?

- Don't feel bad about giving away or selling your husband's things. Everyone does it eventually.
- Be careful about purging everything immediately. You might regret that.
- If you think a particular collection might be worth money, start with a fellow collector. He or she can shed some light on what you have. If it's worth thousands or more, consider bringing in a professional appraiser or auctioneer.
- For things that might be useful, but not really worth a lot monetarily, simply give them to a family member or friend knowing they'll be appreciated.
- Consider using clothes and personal effects to create a memento. For example, using clothes to make a quilt, blanket, or stuffed animal. Or putting sports related items in a framed case.