GRIEFS OF WIDOW(ER) AND THE BETRANDONED

By Linda J. MacDonald

EXPERIENCE OF WIDOW/WIDOWER	EXPERIENCE OF BETRANDONED SPOUSE
1. The loss of a beloved spouse is deeply sad, but death is not a matter of personal rejection. The grief is over the loss of another's presence, closeness, and identity as a spouse. Devastating. Still, the widow(er) usually has the comfort of knowing they were deeply loved.	**1.** Loss of self-esteem, as it feels personal due to extreme rejection. Grief is not just over the loss of a partner but the loss of being valued and cared for by the one who vowed to love and cherish you until death. The loss of being loved by one's spouse feels devastating and leads to questions about ever having been loved.
2. Loss of physical presence. Memories of love and devotion from the deceased remain.	**2.** Loss of commitment, shared presence, and love drives the wounds deeper. Trust is shattered. Past devotion by the partner is retracted. Memories of love are tainted, discounted, or denied. It is difficult to sort truth from lies.
3. Friendships change but are not divided. There are no loyalty conflicts. Friends are not lost, even though a widow often feels like a third wheel with coupled friends. All members feel the loss of the deceased. There are awkward moments, but no hostility is involved.	**3.** Loss of friendships. Friends often feel like they must "choose" between divided partners. Seldom still have shared alliances. Feelings of hostility, judgment, and shame abound. Silent avoidance among some former friends.
4. No need for family members to choose sides. Everyone is safe to care for and be close to the surviving spouse.	**4.** Family loyalty conflicts: Children are torn between their parents; in-laws usually support the biological partner and distance themselves from the betrayed spouse.
5. Friends and family revere widow/widower. People have respect, awe, honor, and empathy for the surviving spouse. Unless or until remarried, still viewed as a widowed husband or wife.	**5**. Stigma attached to loss through a post-affair divorce. Shame, sense of failure, societal disapproval. Feel judged, marginalized, discarded, and inferior in status to others. Loss of identity as a beloved wife/husband.
6. Widow/widower experiences deep, pervasive grief. The person is dead. In most cases, there is a body. Some form of closure is possible over time, although not easy. Reminders through the kids are fond but sad.	**6**. Deep grief, hurt, and wounding continue. The person is "gone" from the relationship but still alive and a source of torment. Difficult to find closure. Wounds reopened through unavoidable contact. "Information" through the kids/friends is painful.
7. While much grief is experienced alone, there are numerous public displays of support and rituals that acknowledge the loss—memorial services, eulogies, flowers, obituaries, burial rites, sympathy cards, letters, flowers, receptions, casseroles, grief support groups, books on grieving, and hugs. There is no shame associated with loss unless the widow grieves longer than socially acceptable.	**7**. Suffer losses in isolation—lack of public rituals, acknowledgment, or expressions of supportive sorrow. Little public permission to grieve. Only "rituals" are legal and private. Urged to "get over it" and "move on". Much shame is associated with being jilted, scorned, and abandoned after betrayal. Prolonged grief is not allowed. Easily labeled "bitter."
8. While one may or may not lose the house, the emotional home is still "home" for surviving family members. Adult kids have a unified place to come home to for holidays and extended stays.	**8.** Kids don't have an intact home to live in or return to on holidays. Must navigate between estranged, disconnected, or hostile separated parents and/or new stepparents. Pain over lost shared holidays with original parents; past celebrations tend to be idealized and yet grieved.

EXPERIENCE OF WIDOW/WIDOWER continued	**EXPERIENCE OF BETRANDONED SPOUSE contin.**
9. Mementos are usually cherished. Photos and sentimental items are treasured reminders of the one who died, and the love shared. Pain over regrets and loss of the person.	**9.** Mementos are painful reminders of love destroyed and tend to "mock" the deserted spouse. Photos are taken down, and sentimental items are hidden or thrown away. Many regrets.
10. The shared history of the marriage remains intact. Loss of future dreams.	**10.** History of marriage rewritten, twisted. Feel robbed, crazy, invalidated. Past memories are corrupted and stolen; future dreams are shattered.
11. While one stream of income may be lost, shared assets remain (and debts?). The surviving spouse still possesses financial assets once shared with the other (retirement, house, cars, other property, furniture, etc.).	**11**. Assets are divided and lost. The legal costs of divorce and property division are often devastating, and divorcees' standard of living is significantly lowered.
12. Recovery involves thorough grieving and making peace with the loss. Sadness must be expressed before one can let go. It is important to honor and grieve each aspect of the loss. Allow moments of grief with family and dearest friends.	**12.** Recovery involves making sense of the marriage's breakdown. Blame and responsibility need to be appropriately assigned so one can grow, let go of wounds, and not allow the past to repeat itself. Grief needs to be honored and processed despite the shame and losses associated with it; this is mostly done privately.
13. Need to find a way to let go of anger over the loss, regrets, and sadness. There was no opportunity to resolve what was unresolved in a relationship.	**13**. Lingering angst lasts long. When anger surfaces, others label it "vindictive." We need to seek enough healing to come to terms with the rejection, betrayal, lies, regrets, shame, and ex's lack of remorse. There is little to no opportunity to process unresolved issues within the relationship. Usually a lack of apologies and amends.
14. The widow must find a way to reorganize life without the spouse and eventually say "goodbye" to the deceased and feelings of injustice over the loss in order to move forward. He/she must adjust to being alone but without shame.	**14**. Find a way to unilaterally forgive your ex, yourself, and betrayals by friends and family. Eventually, say goodbye to your old life and obsession with injustice. Need to entrust injustice to God in order to find peace. Build new friendships. Adjust to being alone and with lingering shame.
15. The widow or widower needs to rebuild a sense of self-identity, integrating past experiences with new ones. Former friends either remain friends or at least friendly. Hopefully, they can build upon previous feelings of being loved by the deceased with new and/or adjusted relationships.	**15.** The task of the Betrandoned is to rebuild self-worth and see themselves as lovable and worthy of devotion. They need to find a way to stop beating themselves up with old accusations of the past (especially from an ex) and create a new, positive identity. They're forced to let go of some old friends and need to find ways to engage with new friends and make peace with the world and God.
16. Find a way to dream new dreams. Humanize the deceased so he/she is no longer idealized or enshrined. Expand social connections; allow room for new love and integrate with memories of the deceased.	**16.** They need to overcome mistrust of the opposite sex or the institution of marriage. Find a way to dream new dreams and look forward. Expand their social network. Let go of final regrets and unhealthy coping strategies to allow room for new relationships or a new love.