



Ask an Expert

Question

My wife died almost two months ago in the care of hospice. Until she was sick, we loved spending time together cooking for our friends and family. We were truly a team of chefs in the kitchen. Now, when I think about cooking at all, I am overwhelmed, as if my brain is falling apart. I have dreamy thoughts like "Maybe she'll come back to cook with me." Is that normal?

Answer

The loss of a life partner is among the most difficult situations any of us can experience. It changes literally everything. And as you have noted, remembering special times that you once shared together can intensify the pain.

I think holidays, anniversaries, and other significant life events can also increase what I call the *discombobulating* impact of grief, when people have a growing sense of disorder, confusion, and bewilderment. Many other widows and widowers share your concern about how to face once shared tasks and life events alone.

One way to approach this new "aloneness" is to seek the support
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The journey of grief

by Kenneth J. Doka

"I thought the funeral would bring me closure and I would be able to move on." Grief counselors frequently hear this lament. We sometimes believe an action or event will release us from grief. Once we see the deceased lying serenely in the casket, we may expect to feel relieved that a person is at peace and no longer suffering. Or it might be the autopsy report that offers hope for closure. If we understand the exact cause of death, we can seal that chapter of our life. Perhaps closure is the expected outcome of a private ritual or memorial service. We expect grief to end.

The term *closure* was used by psychologists in the early 1900s to describe the way humans process information and form conclusions. For example, we are likely to read the typo, *boys and gurls*, as *boys and girls* simply because the latter phrase is so familiar.

In grief, closure never really occurs. The reason is simple. The concept of closure builds on two myths: that grief has a timetable and that we can move beyond our grief by letting go or detaching from the person we loved.

One of the first things I tell my students who are studying to be grief counselors is to bring "closure" to the term "closure." It

is simply not a useful idea when it comes to coping with loss. But this does not mean that the acute grief experience remains constant. Most bereaved people find that over time, their pain lessens and they function as well—sometimes even better than—before the loss. Still, even as their grief recedes, they may experience grief surges, moments when they deeply feel the loss. Grief is not an illness from which to recover nor an experience with a destination. Rather, grief involves a lifelong journey. No single act, or even a combination of actions, changes that.

But there are significant moments that can be beneficial during the grieving process. A meaningful funeral can have incredible therapeutic value. In the same vein,
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"How lucky I am to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard."

— A. A. Milne, *Winnie the Pooh*