

# Grief Before and After Death

A Presentation to the BDS Healthy Aging Network

*The following piece was written for a presentation to The BDS Healthy Aging Network in Baltimore on May 27, 2026. As you may notice, the second section of this piece borrows heavily from a previous blog post on grief after death. As always, I look forward to your comments, questions, and challenges.*

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The death of people we care about becomes increasingly common as we get older; therefore, grief becomes an increasingly unavoidable part of our lives.

That death results in grief is obvious. Less obvious is the fact that grief often, almost inevitably, begins before death. There's even a literature about "anticipatory grief" (see [here](#) and [here](#)) as it's called. People who are dying grieve for themselves. People who care about them grieve in anticipation of losing them.

Today, I will talk about both grief before and after the death of spouses and life partners.

**Grief before death is a difficult emotional journey. It includes:**

**An onslaught of emotions that go far beyond feeling sad.** For example, when my wife was dying, I become much more emotionally sensitive than I had ever been before. Emotions welled up in me at surprising moments. Not just as I watched my wife become weaker and weaker, but once, for example, watching my 9 year old granddaughter playing soccer. Something about the continuity of life brought tears to my eyes, like watching a sentimental movie. My defenses were down.



Grief before death also includes **fear**. For me, not just fear in response to knowing that my wife would die, but fear about whether I could manage what I had to manage to be her caregiver. And fear about what my life would be without her. Roughly 50 years of having her love that was about to end.

**Anger** is also common in people who are about to be left alone. I, for example, became very angry about the failure of health care providers not just to save her, but selfishly about their failure to care about me. I know now, in fact I knew then, that the intensity of this anger was a deflection from my very great anger that my wife was dying and probably an even greater deflection from the anger I felt that she was abandoning me.

**Relationships change.** Inevitably, the relationships between the person who is dying and the partner who will survive them go through significant changes. Some people report that their relationships become deeper, more intense, more loving. Others find themselves growing more distant, held together more by a sense of responsibility than by powerful affection. There is a change in the nature of the partnership that develops uniquely over the course of long relationships. People still plan together, but now plans focus on arranging health care, how to assure the future of children and grandchildren, etc. Planning for the future is less about the *us* that will cease to exist and more about the *me* who will survive. **From being together to being alone.**

I was luckier than some. Many dying people change dramatically as their illness takes hold of them. Fortunately, my wife remained herself up until the moment she slipped into unconsciousness. She grasped the reality, accepted the likelihood of dying soon, and bravely refused to fight the inevitable. Up until the very end she was concerned about the grief others would feel. She offered consolation. And she and I could talk; we could plan; we could watch movies on TV; we had friends over; amazingly we even went to the beach to celebrate our grandson's birthday two weeks before she died.



We remained friends and partners as she became weaker and weaker and as hope for a recovery of significant duration disappeared. We continued to love each other and our marriage, but the nature of our love changed as I became the caregiver and she became the cared for. The erotic part of our love disappeared as she became weaker and weaker. And our division of labor changed. Day to day things like shopping and cleaning and handling the finances, all of which had been managed by one or the other of us now were all on me—fortunately, with help from my daughter. I had less and less time for myself. I felt locked in.

We were about to hire a sitter so that I could have a life outside, but she took a turn for the worse and moved to inpatient hospice.

I stayed with her at the hospice. It was painful watching her grow weaker and weaker. Sometimes I cried. Most nights I slept there—alternating nights with my daughter until I knew the end was near. Then I just stayed. My wife knew I was there most of the time. I held her hand, but we had less and less conversation.

As the end approached, she was unconscious. I held her and talked to her without any visible response from her. At the very end I held her until her breathing finally stopped. Then there was only a lifeless body. She was gone. Painful in the extreme. The bereavement began, grief after death.

That loss begins before death doesn't seem to be adequately anticipated by those who care deeply about a dying person nor is it adequately recognized among health care providers, even palliative care providers.

I hope the health care field will pay more attention to those who live with the imminent death of people they love.

**Grief after death is also a difficult journey—physically, emotionally, and spiritually.**



Grief in response to the death of a life partner is—like grief before death—far more than sadness. Tears well up unexpectedly from time to time. Loneliness is profound, far more than just being alone. The anger is great. For example, I often screamed at the universe in the middle of the night, “F... you!” **I had a sense of a shattered existence.**

Grief actually kills some people. Known as the “widowhood effect”, people who are widowed, especially men, have considerably lower life expectancy than people who have not lost a life partner.

Physical conditions that develop or are exacerbated in the aftermath of the death of a life partner include immune system suppression, cardiovascular issues, sleep disturbances, digestive disruption, chronic pain, and physical symptoms like headaches, dizziness, muscle tension, and chest pain.

Widowhood also has very difficult psychological consequences, including cognitive and neurological changes such as difficulty concentrating, memory issues, and disorientation.

Psychological consequences also include not just one or two or three powerful, troubling emotions by a bundle that includes deep sorrow, tearfulness, emotional turmoil, feeling a void, loneliness, anxiety, sleeplessness, sentimentality, anger, a sense of abandonment, loss of trust, loss of confidence, loss of hope, vulnerability, lapses into irrationality, and more. For some people, there’s a sense of relief that the dying is finally over or even that they are finally out of an unhappy relationship. For many who feel relief there’s also a profound and troubling sense of guilt.

But grief is not just a bundle of emotions. It is also a changed state of being. By that I mean that your sense of yourself in the world changes. I, for example, felt like a stranger in the world I inhabit; I did not feel at home; I felt disconnected; I did not have a sense of belonging; I felt adrift. Some of that continues even today.



When I say that grief is a state of being, I mean to contrast it with the state of being that is characteristic of long, good marriages. Then, there's a shared reality that merges two individuals. That reality is now gone, shattered, lost forever, and there's a new state of being as a single person. For me, after 49 years of marriage, it is a very confusing state. I do not yet know how to be alone.

This is tough and complicated stuff or as I often say when asked: "Grief sucks."

## **How to survive grief?**

Frankly, I'm probably not the person to ask. I haven't dealt with it well. 2 months of hardly sleeping landed me in the hospital. But the standard wisdom is to stay involved with people you care about and who care about you and be active doing things that really engage you. For many people, spiritual experience is also helpful.

I have the good fortune to find my salvation through jazz, which I both play and photograph. That not only keeps me active and connected with people; in addition, at rare moments of improvisation, I feel transported into a transcendent dimension of reality. It's all magical; playing together with other people, playing for an engaged audience, finding something new in the music I play, and finding some truth in the photographs I take.

Everyone should be as blessed as I am with something—love, family, community life, challenging work or hobbies, or spiritual experience. So many possibilities for truly positive and meaningful experience even in very old age.

*\*\*Many thanks to Lisa Furst for her review of literature on anticipatory grief and for commenting on the original draft of this essay.*