

Sleeping Alone

If you've chosen to open this article, it might be the middle of yet another sleepless night. Perhaps you're feeling exhausted, wondering how many hours your mind and body can possibly push away the rest that you so desperately need. It's one of the very lowest and painful points in dealing with the loss of your spouse – long, dark, solitary nights and no relief in sight.

It would be wonderful if we could create a potion or summon a spell to get you to sleep right now. However elusive and magical sleep might seem, there is little to help except some common-sense, practical approaches to get back into the rhythm of everyday life. Here are some suggestions:

- Even though you're tired, daytime sleeping will get you turned around and make getting to sleep at night even harder. If you usually nap, set an alarm to limit the amount of time you're sleeping. If you don't usually nap, fight the sleepiness a bit and, if you can't avoid it, take only a short "power nap" – about twenty minutes.
- Although getting to sleep is feeling chaotic, make a commitment to yourself to observe a standard bedtime for at least 10 days. That means 10 days of saying "no" to anything that interferes with the time you've established. If you're thinking, "So from now on, the only way to get to sleep is to turn in every night at 8:00, like a 4-year old?" – the answer is no. Getting back on track, however, requires discipline and new habits.
- Cut off screen time at least an hour before bed – TV, computer, phone. If you think you need those to get to sleep, that's fine (however you, at least in theory, are reading this because you're not sleeping, so...?).
- Establish a bedtime ritual. You may not recognize that you and your spouse had before-bed rituals, but you probably did. Like so many other daily ways of doing things, this is now in a state of change. Re-establishing a time for doing certain things, doing them in order, and doing all of them every night is important.
- Limit what you do in bed. In other words, save bed for sleeping (or maybe reading and sleeping, if that was a part of your routine that used to work). No eating, talking on the phone, playing with the cat or dog – do that in another room.

- Be a little tough with yourself about getting up. If you wake up, get up (even if you still feel tired). If you've been without sleep for most of the night, give yourself an hour or two, but then get up. Sometimes sleeping in can be a reluctance to face the day with your grief rolling out in front of you like a never-ending field. It's hard to grieve, to face a day of grief. This isn't a moral issue, just a practical one: would you rather face your new reality in the light of day or throughout a long, dark night when everyone you could reach out to for support is sound asleep?
- If necessary, talk to your physician about a sleeping aid. You don't have to use it every night or for the long-term. Perhaps medication for a few nights will help you get straightened around and back to sleep.

There are no easy answers about the most painful part of the experience of losing the one you chose to make a life with, the one you've loved so much and for so long. You miss them. Night is not the same without them – nothing is. Just their breathing (or snoring) was a kind of music to you, the soundtrack of your life. They were the thing that tethered you to life, love, family, yourself and without them the bed feels strange and empty.

Please accept our deepest sympathies in this profound loss. Research and experience has shown that reaching out to others to share your grief experience can make a difference. If you're in our area, look us up. Rainbow Hospice and Palliative Care offers extensive services to those who have lost a spouse. We'd be privileged to provide information and support.

Life right now is difficult and grief is exhausting. Please consider trying some of the good sleep habits we've provided. We just want you to feel better. If you're not so exhausted, everything – even this, can seem less overwhelming.