

WIDOWHOOD: AN END OR A BEGINNING?

Widowhood as a relative life event:

The death of a spouse is considered one of the most stressful of role transitions. The fact that widowhood is a predictable and scheduled life event does not seem to ease the intense loneliness felt without one's spouse or the longing for one's spouse as an individual to return. Studies suggest that no amount of anticipatory socialization can prepare one for the intensity of one's emotional response to widowhood, (Matthews, 1991).

Demographics of Widowhood:

Approximately 86% of the widowed are women, (Matthews, 1991). It is estimated that half of all marriages end with the death of the husband and only one-fifth end with the death of the wife, (Matthews, 1991). Several reasons help account for the fewer number of men than women who are widowed: the differential life expectancy of males and females; the mating gradient- husbands are generally two to three years older than their wives; and the differential in rates of remarriage- men are less likely to become widowed and to remain widowed. About 14% of widowed men remarry, only 5% of widowed women do so, (Matthews, 1991). Therefore, information and discussions on widowhood are generally focused toward women.

Grief and Coping:

People react to bereavement in many different ways. Some common emotional reactions include sorrow, misery, emptiness, loneliness, sleeplessness, and loss of appetite, (Turner, & Helms, 1986). Grieving has different phases. Individuals often experience a period of shock and disbelief first. A period of preoccupation with the deceased and acute expressions of grief often follow. Finally, the recovery period is marked by acceptance of the loss and integration of the self back into society. The ideal situation for coping is to be able to slowly begin to look at the reality of what has happened and to express the feelings that accompany the realization of loss, (Glick, Weiss, & Parkes, 1974). Anything that promotes security and provides a sense of safety will make grieving easier. Expressing grief immediately, rather than repressing it, and going back over the events leading to the death is also helpful in coping with grief and mourning, (Glick, et al., 1974).

The Availability and Use of Help:

The most common form of help is through social support networks. This may consist of family, friends, neighbors, self-help groups, and mutual support groups, (Glick, et al., 1974). The availability of a social support system depends on

whether the bereaved has family members, friends, and neighbors who are still living and are present during the period of bereavement and can get to and from group meetings. Parents and widowed or single friends are often the most important sources of support and provide a nurturing function during the first 18 months of bereavement, (Matthews, 1991). Thereafter, until about three years, widowed or single friends, neighbors, parents, and children, in that order, become the most important sources of support. Social contact with married friends often serves as a painful reminder of what is now gone and may hinder adjustment to bereavement during this time.

Social supporters serve three major functions in the lives of the recently bereaved: to smooth the transition to the role of a widowed person; to offer support and guidance as the widowed individual seeks to establish a new identity; and to provide an incentive to develop new relationships, (Matthews, 1991). Whether social support helps or not depends primarily on three factors: where the widow is in the adjustment process; the specific type of support provided; and the source of that support, (Matthews, 1991).

References:

- *Glick, I. O., Weiss, R. S., & Parkes, C. M.(1974). The first year of bereavement. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- *Matthews, A. M.(1991). Widowhood in later life. Canada: John Deyell Company.
- Turner, J. S., & Helms, D. B.(1986). Contemporary adulthood (3rd ed.). New York: CBS College Publishing.
- * *recommended for further reading*

Recommended Links:

Support & Information for Widows is available through

<http://www.fortnet.org/~goshorn/WidowNet>

Information on coping with grief is available through

<http://www.fortnet.org/Hospice/index.ht>
