

| Surviving Spouse Checklist

There's a lot to do when a loved one passes away. This guide provides a recommended list of what to do and when. But first, if you just lost a spouse, remind yourself to not make any big decisions for at least a year, such as selling a house and gifting large amounts. Do what needs to be done, but give yourself time to grieve and make space for rational decisions before addressing major changes. Be patient with yourself.

It's also important to put together a financial team to help with the many tasks you'll need to address. You may not know who to call or there may be professionals who you aren't sure about what they do for your family. Don't be afraid to call them and ask what they do, and to ask about anything you don't understand. If a professional is not patient and helpful to you, find someone new. Your financial team members will be some of the most important folks around you. Make sure you trust them and don't feel pressured by any of them to make decisions you don't understand.

There are many resources out there to help you stay organized in a tremendously difficult time. Here we provide a comprehensive list of the days and weeks following the loss of a spouse – we hope you find it useful.

| Your Financial Team

Financial Advisor

Your financial advisor can help coordinate between you and other professionals. She will also help you run financial plans, navigate insurance needs, optimize Social Security, retitle accounts for you, roll over your spouse's retirement plans to your name, and more.

Estate Attorney

An attorney will help with interpreting your spouse's estate plan documents and assist with updating yours.

Tax Preparer

Whether this is a CPA or other professional, this person will help file the estate tax return for the deceased as well as your own taxes going forward.

First Few Days After Losing a Spouse...

- People will want to help you. Let them.** Can a friend respond to the many condolence cards you receive? Perhaps a family member can help you create a system for tracking all the myriad financial and estate planning tasks. Can someone answer the phone for you for a while? It helps others grieve to help you right now.
- Consider what is important to you to honor your spouse.** There is no correlation between how much a memorial service costs and how much you loved them. Do what feels right to you.
- Obtain multiple certified copies of the death certificate.** You may need upwards of 10 – more if your financial lives are complicated. Various institutions will need these to process account transfers, insurance benefits, Social Security transactions, etc.
- Assemble your personal support team.** Especially for the first week, who do you want around to help you? You get to decide. Ask them to help you remember to eat, drink water, feed pets, and get rest.
- Call your financial team.** This includes your estate attorney, tax advisor, and financial advisor. They will be a huge help to you right now, and this team will be indispensable in the coming year. My clients say feeling informed and educated about their financial life after losing a spouse takes one big stress off their plate. If you were not the primary one working with any of the professionals in your life, reach out and ask questions. If you are not treated with the utmost respect and patience, find a new person. There are no dumb questions and if an advisor makes you feel anything other than empowered, search for a new one who lifts you up.
- Find your spouse's will and other estate documents.** Your estate attorney or safe deposit box are good places to start if you don't know where to look.
- Locate your spouse's legal and financial documents.** These include assets, debts, real estate, insurance policies. [Here is a resource](#) that might help you get organized. There will be a lot to track over time, so make a master list to document what you've dealt with and what you haven't. (Or ask an organized friend to help you go through the paperwork and make this list for you.)
- Keep a log of everything.** Log who you call, when, and about what. You are grieving and no human can remember all these things.
- Notify the Social Security office of your spouse's death.** Their office number is (800) 772-1213. Have handy your spouse's Social Security number and date of birth, as well as your own and any minor children. Keep (but do not cash) any paper Social Security checks for the deceased. Depending on your age and whether your spouse was receiving benefits, you may also be eligible for benefits. Your financial advisor can help you navigate this system.
- If applicable, notify the department of Veteran's Affairs (VA).** If your spouse was in the military, notify the VA and request information about benefits. Often funeral homes will help with this task.
- Keep all receipts involving your spouse's death.** This includes medical and funeral costs. You'll need these later for estate tax filing.
- Placing a notice online or in the local paper.** When notifying the community about your spouse's passing, you may wish to avoid including specific information such as an exact date of birth or death, as this can leave open the possibility of identity theft.

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First Few Weeks...

- Stay organized.** You have a lot on your plate. A calendar and notebook for all the details can help. One widow I work with created a binder with all the important paperwork regarding her husband's death and their finances. When she went to the bank or talked with an insurance company, she had everything at her fingertips. She set up a table with all the paperwork and taped a list to the wall so nothing got buried. We also worked together to see what I could take off her plate and we checked in regularly. There were days when she was not up to tackling that paperwork, but it gave her more confidence to know she was organized for later on when she did have the energy.
- Contact financial institutions.** Banks, investment accounts, insurance companies, pensions, and retirement plans will all need updating. Your financial advisor can help create a list of your accounts and can take some of these details off your plate. Along these lines:
 - File for benefits such as life insurance or annuity policies.
 - If you have a safe deposit box, locate it and review the contents. If your name is not on it, you may need a copy of the will and a death certificate.
 - Ask your estate attorney if/when you should change titling on all assets or hold off on some (the answer will depend on where you live and the value of your total assets).
 - Change titling on accounts into your name as recommended, and cancel accounts that are in your spouse's name only.

NOTE: If your spouse was the actual account holder on things like credit cards and you were merely an authorized user, you will not be able to use the credit cards once you notify the bank of your spouse's death. Apply for cards of your own first. You may also wish to keep a joint checking account intact for a while so you have a place to deposit any checks that come in the name of the deceased.
- Consult your financial advisor** about the best way to receive life insurance payments. Some companies may suggest options that are not the best for you, such as tying up funds in an annuity or product you don't need or understand. Again, consult your financial team.
- Contact your spouse's employer** and ask about insurance policies, workplace retirement accounts, balances in health savings accounts, stock options, and any bonuses or unused paid time off due. Did your spouse also have former employers who might still hold an old 401k plan?
- Notify all three credit bureaus** (Equifax, TransUnion, and Experian) that your spouse has died and ask them to mark their accounts as such. You will need a death certificate to do this, but often you only need to inform one credit bureau and they will notify the other two.
- Keep paying your bills**, including the mortgage, credit cards, insurance, and utilities.
- Call the insurance company** and request they adjust your auto insurance coverage.
- Cancel the deceased's driver's license.**
- Change registration on utility and subscription accounts** (like Amazon, Costco, etc.) from your spouse's name to your own. Cancel those you don't need.
- Do you have minor children or children in college?** Find out what resources they have available to your family. Contact the schools if you receive financial aid and request a review of your new situation.
- Medical insurance coverage:** If your insurance was through your spouse's employer, call them to discuss options for remaining covered. You can usually stay on COBRA for up to 36 months. If your spouse was on Medicare, you'll need to notify that agency. You'll need to cancel your spouse's insurance coverage but keep/manage all medical bills that might come in. This is another topic your financial advisor can help with.
- Personal effects and social media:**
 - Secure your spouse's wallet or purse and keep it in a safe place until you need the items inside.
 - Find your spouse's cell phone or computer; they will have important information on them such as contacts, upcoming appointments, and other details that will help you prioritize calls and what should go on the to-do list. There might even be a voicemail of your spouse's voice you want to preserve.
 - You may wish to keep one or more of their social media accounts for a while and transition it into a memorial page.
- Remember that all this is going to be hard.** You may sit on hold for hours. The people helping you may not be sensitive to what you are going through. My friend Mary was shocked at how insensitive some people were as she navigated through her to-do list after her husband died. Her advice: try to do one thing each day, as best you can. Take deep breaths and call a friend who is happy to just let you cry if that's what you need.

Next Three to Six Months...

- Remember that part about letting others help you?** Let others help you. This might be a good time to call someone who previously offered to come over and mow your lawn this week. They won't care your husband died seven months ago; they will probably be grateful to be there for you. And no, you don't have to make them lunch or give elaborate thanks. A friend of mine lost her husband nearly a year ago and asked me to help with some disorganized piles of papers. She didn't have the energy to know what she should keep or shred and I was thrilled to finally feel like I helped in a tiny way after her loss.
- Keep plugging away at the "First Three Months" list if it's not done.** You'll know you missed something when you get a statement for an account or insurance policy in the mail you didn't realize you still had. Your checklists will come in handy here to help figure out what is outstanding.
- Retirement account details:**
 - Transferring some types of assets is complicated. Ideally your spouse's retirement accounts will roll directly into yours. If not, make sure to deposit any checks in the right place and promptly. You don't want to miss the strict 60-day cutoff allowed for 401k rollovers. Again, your financial advisor can help with this process.
 - If your deceased spouse was required to take a required minimum distribution (RMD) and had not done so for the year, you will need to take it as the beneficiary. The RMD is required for those over a certain age (currently 70.5 and 72, depending on the situation). If your eyes are glazing over about now, never fear, your financial advisor has got this.
- Transfer titling on vehicles and real estate.** Often an estate attorney can help with these tasks.
- Cash flow and future financial planning:**
 - Review your cash flow and figure out what is coming in and what is going out. Do you need to update your financial plan? Will you need to increase your income or decrease expenses? "Hey, financial advisor..."
 - You can sign up for surviving spouse benefits with Social Security as soon as age 60. The amount will be lower the sooner you start benefits, however, and this is a decision that cannot be reversed, so again, "Hey, financial advisor... what should I do?"
- Taxes:** Your spouse's estate tax return is due 9 months after their date of death. This date can arrive quickly. Talk to your tax preparer early to know what you need to gather. Final expenses are deductible from the estate tax return, so those saved receipts will come in handy now.
- Estate planning:**
 - Update your own estate plan. If you named your spouse as having power of attorney for your own financial and health care matters, you'll need to revise these documents and choose someone else now.
 - Update your beneficiaries on accounts and policies. It's likely you listed your spouse and will want to choose new beneficiaries.
 - If the deceased was a beneficiary on someone else's accounts, those people should update their designations, too.
- Cancel subscriptions and memberships** you no longer need.
- Are you taking care of yourself?** Get enough sleep, schedule time for a massage or a walk with a friend. It is so hard to practice good self-care when you are drowning in grief and it can help to schedule a bit of sacred time each day, even if it's just a quiet moment with a cup of tea.

Landing on Your Feet

Long Term Navigation of your Financial Life Going Forward

The first year or so after a spouse dies, life is often full of grief and paperwork. And it can take much longer to feel like there is a semblance of a new normal. One widowed client of mine says “the first year was paperwork and crying, the second year was just plain lonely and full of insular self-care, and the third year I started to be able to look ahead beyond just a few days at a time. I finally felt like I could make plans to go for lunch and a movie with friends.” But her timeline might not be yours.

- Grief comes in lots of guises and is not a linear process.** You might feel better for a while only to hear a certain song and just plain lose it for a week. Birthdays and anniversaries are important, and it can be helpful to honor them. Be kind to yourself and surround yourself with people who give you the space to deal with the loss in your own way and in your own time.
- Tell people what you need.** We don't tend to be good at death in our culture. People might not know what to say so they stop calling. Or they say they want to help but don't make it easy for you to know how. Reach out and ask; your friends may be relieved to have a specific way to help you.
- Take stock of what matters to you.** You might find there are items you want to keep and see every day and others that weigh you down. One client found emptying her husband's clothes closets while she dressed in the morning made her feel less sad every day. But keeping his favorite cooking pots helped her remember him when he was happiest – cooking for the family. As time goes on, some of these decisions may become clearer.
- You may be ready for bigger changes as time passes,** such as selling your home or remodeling the bathroom or going on a big trip. Take time to appreciate how this feels and why you are feeling more ready for change.
- What parts of dealing with the aftermath of your spouse's death were the hardest?** Are there changes you can make to help make it easier for others if something happens to you? Consider updating your own estate plans, making a binder of your financial life, and cleaning out your attic.
- As you find space to create new memories, honor them and maybe even share them** aloud in private with your loved one. One widow I know likes to talk to her husband out loud (years after he died) to help her process her day. She calls it her 'Mike time.'
- Find your people.** Join a widow's group if you're not already part of one. W Connection is just one of the many national and local groups that are for widows, by widows.

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