

Three Steps to Help a Grieving Widow

Losing your spouse impacts every aspect of your life; it can be completely overwhelming. You are not supposed to do it all alone. There are people and professionals who can help.

When you lose your spouse, it is critical to take the time you need to grieve and avoid the temptation to go it alone. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness; it is actually the first step towards healing and moving forward. It is not a good idea to make any major financial decisions immediately after your loss. However, it is important to protect yourself in the short term. "The most widely cited profile of a target for financial abuse is generally a white woman over 75 who is living alone (Bernatz et al., 2001; Rush and Lank, 2000; Tueth, 2000)."

I have rescued many widows from purchasing financial products with long term surrender charges simply because they were told, and believed, that they would get higher interest on their monies if they did. As soon as a widow deposits a large check such as a life insurance benefit into an account, they are immediately encouraged to go to the institution's investment area. I have actually accompanied recently widowed clients to the institution to ensure they are not sold these products before they have even had time to research and understand their big financial picture.

Find a qualified financial planner who will work with you to review your finances, to help you construct your complete financial picture. I advise my clients who were not actively involved in managing their finances prior to the loss of their spouse to collect their mail, and then we schedule a time to sit down together to go through it. One client received a check but was uncertain of its source. She knew that she and her husband had received a check every quarter, but she never knew the source of the check. There were no statements in her financial files that explained it. I asked if the check might be a stock dividend from a stock certificate that she had somewhere. Her eyes got big after I asked, and she went and pulled out a small metal box. Inside the box was an envelope with a stock certificate valued at almost \$15,000. The discovery of unknown or misplaced accounts and investments takes time, and much of it happens during tax season. A widow may receive 1099s from accounts she never knew existed. This is why it is critically important to get help in locating and understanding your complete financial situation **before** making any big decisions -- or buying any financial products.

It can take 6-8 months to untangle a couple's finances. One client's spouse had created two accounts for every investment; one into a trust name and one in joint name. There were at least 30 accounts. It took 9 months to consolidate the 30 accounts into one simplified account. Most families try to settle finances as quickly as possible which can be a recipe for disaster. Not clearly identifying future needs and making hasty decisions are common mistakes, and ones that many later regret.

Finding and partnering with a financial planner will give you time to grieve while they locate all of your assets and build a complete financial picture. Once your assets are identified and organized AND you are emotionally able to participate, the process begins in which you define your long term financial goals and make informed financial decisions.

So where do you start?

1. Ask for help. Seek advice from a qualified financial planner who can begin to review and organize your estate/finances while you take the necessary time to grieve. What you don't know about your finances can hurt you. While you are beginning to acclimate to being alone, your financial planner can begin researching and assessing your immediate and longer term financial needs. Most certified financial planners provide an initial free meeting to discuss your needs. You can also go to <http://www.napfa.org> to search for fee-only planners in your area.

2. Take time to rest, grieve. Do not make any significant financial decisions before you have taken this time. Quick decisions made too soon or without the proper information or counsel can dramatically impact your long term financial outcomes. Protect yourself from those who may pressure you to make quick decisions regarding investments.

3. Schedule a meeting with a qualified fee-only financial planner once you are ready. Take this time to ask questions. Clarify your priorities and personal preferences and discuss specifically what you would like to accomplish as you move forward. Ensure that your planner understands your needs, not just your list of assets. Ask your planner about the discovery meeting that will help you uncover your financial desires and profile/personality. Your financial planner can create a customized long term financial vision based on your specific circumstances and wishes.



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