

## THE LOSS OF A LIFE PARTNER

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**CAROLYN WALTER**  
*PhD, LCSW*

### Learning Objectives

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- Understand the concept of disenfranchised grief.
- Understand issues facing bereaved partners from domestic, gay and lesbian relationships.
- Understand appropriate individual and group interventions with bereaved partners from domestic, gay and lesbian relationships.

### Statistics on Cohabiting Couples in the U.S.

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- 8+ million men and women live in cohabitating relationships
- 4.5 unmarried partner households—domestic and gay/lesbian
- Between 1970-2000, number of women between 20-24 yrs. who were unmarried DOUBLED
- Cohabiting couples represents largest growing group of couples at either end of life cycle
- Little literature available on bereaved domestic or lesbian partners

### GRIEF

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- Feelings, thoughts, behaviors related to grief
- Holmes and Raye stress scale
- Loss of self
- Dual process of mourning

### DISENFRANCHISED GRIEF

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- Grief experienced when loss/relationship cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported
- Lack of role or status for bereaved partner often leads to judgmental attitudes

### DISENFRANCHISED GRIEF

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- Exclusion of bereaved from active role in care of dying and/or funeral rituals
- Social support
- Degree to which relationship is accepted by others influences social support

### Themes from narratives of domestic partners

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- Lack of socially sanctioned roles
- Discrimination faced by domestic partners around end of life issues
- Lack of support from society and/or family

### Themes from narratives of gay men

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- Revealing gay status helps gain support
- Aids as a complicating factor survivor's guilt
- Managing the care process

### Themes from narratives of lesbian women

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- Negative impact of homophobic community
- Support is dependent upon revealing status of relationship both prior to and following the loss
- Friends become family following a death
- Discrimination around end-of-life issues

### INTERVENTIONS WITH DOMESTIC PARTNERS

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- Validate the loss and nature of the relationship
- Help bereaved cope with guilt via self forgiveness
- Use of ritual
- Help bereaved design strategies that will compensate for lack of necessary supports
- Design support groups

### INTERVENTIONS WITH LESBIAN PARTNERS

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- Address issues of disenfranchised grief—validate the loss/relationship
- Consider encouraging bereaved lesbian partner to share nature of relationship to gain support from others
- Hospice workers need training in issues facing bereaved lesbian partners
- Design support groups for lesbian partners

### INTERVENTIONS WITH GAY MEN

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- Issue of bereavement overload due to AIDS deaths
- Issue of "off time" death due to young age of bereaved
- Issue of stigma on bereavement
- Recognize "hidden grievers"
- Importance of social support—help bereaved compensate for absence of supports



## **MEANING MAKING AS A PART OF HEALING PROCESS**

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- Most partners expressed ways in which loss of partner had changed their life in positive as well as negative ways
- Case examples to illustrate this meaning-making experience



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Thank You!