HOW TO GET YOUR LIFE BACK TOGETHER AFTER LOSS: A 10 STEP CHECKLIST

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Introduction



Many widows find that after losing their spouse, life can feel non-stop with a never-ending to-do list and constant tasks to take care of. It's normal if you feel overwhelmed by everything on your plate — especially when you're taking on so much and struggling to balance everything in your life when you're used to sharing those tasks with your partner. At these moments, it may seem that you can never get ahead and the pain and hurt you're feeling will never go away.

There are not just the day-to-day household chores to tend to, but also the mental and emotional anguish you are going through. Grieving takes a toll on every part of life.

How do we even start a healthy healing journey?

How can we move through grief with intention and find inner peace?

It seems impossible to work through the intense overwhelm, not knowing where to start, with no clear direction ahead. It's time to take a step back and consider how to get your life together in reasonable, healthy ways.

"I can be changed by what happens to me, but I refuse to be reduced by it."

~Maya Angelou

GET YOUR LIFE BACK TOGETHER: A 10 STEP CHECKLIST

If you feel like your life has spun out, you're not alone. The Holmes-Rahe stress assessment test rates life stressors. It ranks "losing a spouse" as the number 1 most stressful thing a person can go through in life. Everything that has been familiar to you has changed. you feel a sense of vulnerability and uncertainty. you feel unsafe. And when you feel unsafe, you start to make decisions based on fear.

This feeling of unsafety causes us to feel a total lack of control.

If you identify with feeling this way, your inner voice is likely saying, "I need to get my life together. I wish I could figure out how to get my life back together". Long term stress from grief can cause physical symptoms like exhaustion, insomnia, heart palpitations, shallow breathing, anxiety, nausea, muscle aches, mental fog, even chest pain.

Getting yourself together helps you reset and find a better way to balance grieving and living day-to-day life. In taking steps to reduce overwhelm, you can regain control of your life, set new routines, and hopefully see a reduction in some of those debilitating stress symptoms.

While it's always best to seek the help of a professional, therapist, counselor, or life coach, there are steps you can take on your own, too.

Start by becoming aware of what you need and aware of what you're lacking.

This understanding, beginning with awareness, helps guide us on a path to rebuilding life again.

Here is your step-by-step guide, the "how to get my life together checklist."



1 Practice Self-Compassion

Are you being nice to yourself? Are you treating yourself the same way you would treat your best friend if she were in your situation. Widows are so hard on themselves for so many different reasons.

We think we're stupid for reacting a certain way to something.

We shame ourselves for feeling a certain way.

We get angry at ourselves for showing too much emotion.

We get frustrated with ourselves for not knowing what to do.

We get aggravated with ourselves for not grieving faster.

We berate ourselves for not being able to do the work of two people, in the house or as a parent. We think we should be able to be both mom and dad for the kids.

We put so much pressure on ourselves to have all of the answers immediately and know exactly what do to make everything better and to make ourselves feel better and to make our kids feel better.

You lose your spouse and You're suddenly thrown into this completely different life. It's a brutal awakening of how far you're being stretched.

You find yourself stretched so thin, just treading water and trying to navigate and manage all of the change that's happening in your world, AND navigate these unfamiliar feelings and emotions that are running through your body and your brain.

It's a rocky place to be. It's a lonely place to be. It's a very unsettled place that you're in, that place of transition and unwanted change.

With practice we can comfort and re-assure ourselves to work through our life challenges with a healthier response, like kindness and compassion and understanding.

Mindfulness helps us acknowledge we are actually suffering due to the loss, without adding judgment. We are not broken because we are suffering. Mindfulness helps us sit with those feelings, sit with the hurt, sit with the sorrow, instead of denying those feelings and pushing them deep down inside. Mindfulness lets us acknowledge what is real and true and happening in the very moment we're in.

Say to yourself "May I give myself some grace to figure out my way through this." Or "May I be patient with myself while I figure this widow thing out."

This takes some practice, but it's a good practice to try when you are feeling stressed out.

2 Reconnect With Yourself - Find What You Love!

You can reconnect with yourself by doing things that reflect what you love. Buy that new bedroom set that matches your style. Create a ritual of going for a morning walk every day at 6am. Get that tattoo that you've been thinking about getting, because it has meaning to you. This also applies to your home. Fill your home with things that you love, symbols from meaningful parts of your life, souvenirs from your travels, Doing these things with intention. Start making meaning and purpose of your life now!

The next thing you can do to reconnect with yourself is to ask yourself some personal questions. As silly as this may sound, you can do this through journaling and using exploratory journal prompts.
Questions are always the best way to get down to deep details and specifics.
Sit with the words on the page and try to form insights based on your feelings.
Once you're armed with these insights, you can take meaningful steps toward creating a new life.

Good questions help get to the nitty gritty of who you are. So, get curious about yourself. Become more self-aware in this process.
Allow yourself to wonder.
Throughout the day, take note of your response to things, and ask "I wonder what that thought was about? Or I wonder what made me feel that way?"



"Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside, awakes."

~Carl Jung

3 Set Small, but Achievable Goals

You may feel overwhelmed because you're moving without much purpose or direction. It's normal to get caught up in the whirlwind of grief and feel like you're just going through the motions of work, personal commitments, extracurricular activities with kids, all while handling the "business" side of grief. Setting small goals can help provide some clarity and give you some sense of relief simultaneously. This is the beauty of setting goals.

The key is to keep them small and achievable, tackling one thing at a time and not focusing on the giant list of things that need to be done.

Assess whether there are any really big tasks you could put on the back burner for a while.

Perhaps trying to sell your spouse's car right now is pushing your stress levels over the edge. Maybe the thought of going through all your spouse's clothes brings up an enormous level of anxiety. You can take this goal off your to-do list for the time being and prioritize or set another one, like picking just three special clothing items you know you'd like to save. Or maybe cleaning out just one of their bathroom drawers is more manageable at this time.

Breaking those big goals into smaller, bite-size goals lets you take small steps toward that uncertain future without trying to reinvent your new life overnight. And don't forget about the satisfaction of scratching things off of an actual list! Tracking progress toward these benchmarks during a difficult and turbulent time can remind you how determined and resilient you are, boosting your self-esteem and confidence.



4 Find Your Support Team

This is a crucially important step in getting your life back together - knowing that you can't go on this journey alone.

We are not meant to grieve alone.

Yes, you may feel a need for solitude and self-reflection. These are also a must. And we must give ourselves that time alone to process and reflect on our experience. But, we are communal beings and we need each other to get through the hard times.

Find your people. Find those who will step up and be there by your side when you need them. Find a person close to you who can advocate for you. Find a person who will go with you to meet doctors and attorneys, who will be that extra set of eyes and ears for you when the widow fog takes over. You need cheerleaders. You need close friends who will just sit and listen. Those friends who will come over just to give you a hug. Make a list of those people in your life you can count on.

Part of this step also involves identifying the toxic people in our lives.
Have you ever had a friend or partner who drains your energy?
Toxic relationships are often time-consuming and stressful, leaving you feeling even more tired, more sad, and sometimes feeling even more self-doubt. They are not building you up. They are breaking you down even further.

Consider whether there's a toxic relationship in your life you could let go of or set boundaries on. Look for the common red flags when encountering those people. These include constant negativity, argumentativeness, self-centeredness, and most of all, judgment. If a "friend" is not supporting you in the way that you need, you may want to take a step back from that relationship to focus on your needs.

Stay Active & Move Your Body

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We can't talk about getting your life together without talking about getting and staying healthy. That means you must move your body, regularly. You must stay active, daily. Studies show that even just 20-60 minutes of moderate exercise once or twice per week will provide health benefits.

Specifically, research shows that cardiovascular exercises are known to improve mental health and happiness.

Active people are happier people, with higher self-esteem and higher levels of life satisfaction.

Be sure to schedule in your exercise time and stay consistent. Taking a break to go and exercise provides a much-needed break from grieving. It's a mental pause. It's something you can do as a healthy distraction from the reality of your current situation.

Exercises like yoga and Tai Chi can provide not only physical benefits, but also mental stimulation. These forms of moving meditations can enhance more peace and calm into your chaotic life.
Both of these practices are designed to enhance body awareness and promote bringing awareness back to center for grounding and relaxation.

6 Get Into A Routine

Routines foster success, improved sleep, better mental and physical health, and social functioning. Getting into one can help you regain control and make you feel more grounded.

Set an alarm for the same time every day, take breaks and eat meals at similar hours each day, and get into a rhythm of extracurricular activities. Bolster your success by predicting what could disrupt your routine, like using a snooze button or overscheduling your day. Take steps to make sure you stay on track — like meal planning ahead of time or coordinating child care with a sitter regularly so you can say, keep up with afternoon workouts.

Start small. And don't worry if you get off track!

Give yourself a break!

Establishing healthy habits takes time.

These healthy habits will help you get out of the rut you're in and encourage you to take better care of all aspects of your life, leading to a better sense of control.



7 Simplify Your Life!

Start by asking yourself “How can I make my life easier? What do I need to do in order to feel less stressed?”

Whether your list includes managing the household bills, hiring a dog-walker, or scheduling after-school care for the kids a few days a week. Find ways to simplify your day-to-day tasks, even small ones, can make a huge impact.

Hate cooking and having to come up with meal ideas? Instead of grabbing that box of Kraft mac-n-cheese for the third time this week, put in an order with a company like Hello Fresh. Meals are delivered to your door each week, so there’s no thought or worry at meal time.

This means you must become a master of delegation, which may feel overwhelming at first. But once you get your systems in place, you will feel the stress melt away.

The more you delegate, the simpler your life becomes.

We think we should be able to handle it all. And oftentimes, we feel guilty for not being able to juggle all of the things we need to.

You can’t do it all!

If you’re feeling guilty about asking for help, just tell yourself that this is all temporary. It’s not forever. You’re just finding your footing and working your way through new, uncharted territory.



“Within you, there is a stillness and a sanctuary to which you can retreat at any time and be yourself.”

~Herman Hesse

Adopt A Positive Mindset

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It's hard to not feel the overwhelm of grief. The sadness, the stress, the anxiety, that all lead to the overwhelming negativity that takes over us mentally and emotionally. It's difficult to stop the "can't do attitude." You convince yourself you'll never overcome challenges, you'll never be happy again, you'll never feel normal again.

Even when you're struggling, there are positive aspects of your life.

This is where the power of gratitude comes into play. If you commit to a positive mindset, you'll be able to see and appreciate them.

A positive outlook doesn't mean sugar-coating reality. It implies seeing the good and the bad, reminding yourself of the miracle of your life, the small blessings that surround you, your gifts and talents, the beauty of the world.

You cannot see what you don't look for, and you cannot look for what you don't believe in. When you adopt a positive mentality, you learn to accept what is and surrender to what is, which is not always an easy thing to do.

9 Stop People-Pleasing & Set Some Boundaries

Take a close look at how you are spending your time.
How much time are you spending on activities that you must do (i.e., for work) verses spending time on activities you actually want to do for yourself?

Are there any things you're solely doing to please others?

Sometimes we can get into a trap of feeling obligated to do things with and for others, even though it's not something we really want to do.

For example, your in-laws may expect you to come over every Sunday evening for dinner with them even though you just want to spend time at home. You might feel obligated to also go out with friends who want to go out dancing all night, when all you want to do is stay home. You feel like you have to say "yes" to every school event, because otherwise people may think you're a "bad" mom.

What are you saying "yes" to that is not really serving you or bringing you joy?

It may be time to make some changes. Say "no" to a new project at work/school if your plate is already full.



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Allow Time For Reflection & Grieving

Taking time for yourself doesn't have to mean booking a spa weekend or going on an extravagant vacation.

While those fun experiences can rejuvenate you, it's best to make self-care a consistent routine of healthy habits. Like, establishing a Sunday afternoon meal-planning ritual to enjoy healthy meals for the week ahead.

Schedule a daily walk outside and get some much-needed physical exercise. Protect your sleep routine to get optimal rest.
And enjoy the beauty of simply being in solitude.

Spend your time alone sitting with your thoughts and emotions and acknowledging the full volume of your experience without judging yourself. Allow yourself to feel all of the emotions, even the ones you think are "wrong", like anger, guilt, shame.

There are no wrong emotions.

Simply sit and be a witness to how you feel without trying to stop it.

This is a key part of healing after loss.



Take Back Control Of Your Life

Sometimes, you look up from your life and don't even recognize it.
You don't recognize the person in the mirror looking back at you. You feel lost in an unrecognizable life. Healing after loss is the most difficult thing you will ever do.
Knowing how to get your life together after losing a loved one doesn't necessarily come naturally. Grief work is hard work.
It seems impossible to know where to start.
By reading this, simply taking that action and bringing awareness to the possibility of change, you're taking the first step toward taking back control of your life.
All of these steps will help you to rebuild your life after a devastating loss and ultimately put you back on a path to happiness and fulfillment.



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