Widowhood. It can happen to any married woman. We know …it happened to us. Whether your spouse battles a long illness or dies suddenly, one is never prepared for being a widow. Devastation, loneliness, sadness and loss of direction make widowhood one of the most difficult times in a woman’s life. Of all married women, 75% will be widowed at least once in their lives. Yet, women receive little or no training on how to be a widow. And, there is little offered to assist these women on how to deal with and adapt to the consequences of their loss. As a result, a number of myths prevail.

Myths about widowhood make this time even harder and more confusing. When a woman loses her spouse, friends, family and service professionals want to help, so they give widows advice and guidance. And, since widows are anxious for help to get through this devastating time, they listen. But experience has shown that much of this well-intentioned advice is based on myth instead of reality.

This article identifies the most prevalent myths about widowhood and, more importantly, describes the realities accompanying these myths.

**Myth 1:** When it comes to grieving, one size fits all

**Reality:** Different personalities, situations, and life experiences causes everyone to grieve and adapt to loss differently. Lots of different factors come into play: age, the length of a marriage, good/bad marriage, economic situations, children/no children, and career status, just to name a few. One size DOES NOT fit all. A widow’s goal should be to make the best decisions she can based on the circumstances she is facing.

**Myth 2:** There is a time limit for grieving

**Reality:** When widows are given time limits to “get over their grief”– be it six months, one year or two years – they feel inadequate and abnormal.
if they haven’t “gotten over it” in the allotted time. At some point in
the bereavement process, most widows realize that they need to
learn new skills to adapt to the new realities of their lives. This isn’t
a time-limited process, but an evolving one, whereby the needs of
widows change over time. Different needs and tasks are relevant at
various stages in the widows’ transitions.

**Myth 3:** You will “move on” or “get over it”

**Reality:** Widowhood is not a disease, sickness or mental illness. It is a fact
of life, and there is no recovering. Women learn to live with it, cope
with it and survive it. They learn to integrate this loss into the
realities of their new life. With time, there is less frequent crying and
less anger, laughter will come back, and focus shifts to the future.

**Myth 4:** The second year is easier than the first

**Reality:** As the shock and numbness fade, a widow becomes more
clearheaded. She realizes the life that was built for two must now
be lived by one. She needs to construct a new identity, and
becomes increasingly aware of how many changes she will need to
make in her life--and how many challenges she will be facing alone.
She realizes that the real work is ahead of her, and that she must
rebuild her life.

**Myth 5:** With time, life returns to “normal”

**Reality:** Soon after a woman loses her husband, she is typically supported
by friends and family. Eventually, though, they must return to their
“normal” lives. After the death of a spouse, widows cannot go
back to their lives as they were before. There is no “normal” for a
widow. Regardless of age or circumstance, widows all have one
thing in common: a woman who has lost her spouse has lost more
than a life partner – she has lost her way of life. Widows must
learn to incorporate this loss into their lives, and not burden
themselves with the expectation that they have to return to
“normal.”

**Myth 6:** Widowhood is reserved for the elderly

**Reality:** Contrary to popular belief, in the United States the average age of a
woman who loses her spouse is 55. One third of those women will
lose their spouse before they are 45, leaving many women to raise
their children alone.

© 2010 The W Connection, Inc.
**Myth 7:** There is a linear, logical sequence to grieving  
**Reality:** Widows experience many emotional ups and downs during the healing process. There are many days when a widow will feel she has made progress in retaking control of her life and adapting to the new realities of her life. And then, something happens that makes her feel like she is experiencing a major setback – it can evidence itself as a fit of anger, feeling very overwhelmed, or having a severe crying jag. The reason could be an anniversary, a birthday, hearing a special song on the radio, or running into an old friend. The healing process feels like a very crooked path for most widows. Grieving will happen for each woman in her own time, and in her own way.

**Myth 8:** There is a right way and a wrong way to grieve  
**Reality:** When dealing with the loss of a spouse, there is no playbook. What works well for one woman may not work at all for another. Widows often look for ways to determine whether they are “doing it right”, or ask themselves, “Should I be doing something I’m not doing?” Widowhood is a time of great self doubt for women, since the loss of their spouse most often results in a feeling of total loss of control over their lives. This is a time when widows need to be very self protective and do those things that feel right to them…not do things that others think they should do.

**Myth 9:** Time heals all wounds  
**Reality:** A widow does not heal from losing her spouse. She adapts to her new reality. Sadness still exists, she experiences periods of anxiety, and tears come and go. With the passage of time, she gains more control over her emotions and her new life, and gains greater confidence. She has no choice – she must change, she must rebuild. And time helps her do this.

**Myth 10:** Don’t talk in front of the kids about their father’s death  
**Reality:** When children lose a parent, they grieve and experience many of the same emotions as a grieving adult. The way they respond varies based on their ages, their stages of development, and their personalities. They want guidance about what these feelings mean and how to cope with them, yet may not know how to ask, or may not want to ask for help. Research has shown that there are several crucial factors in helping children cope with the death of a loved one, including the mother’s ability to be there for her children, to
recognize that they are mourning, and to provide them with caring support as they deal with the emotions and changes facing them. This definitely includes talking about the loss and its impact on the family.

Talking with your children about the death of your spouse is especially difficult when you are dealing with your own grief. However, it is during these difficult times that your love and support are especially important to your children. They learn to deal with their grief by watching how you cope. What’s more, helping others deal with their pain can sometimes provide us with a momentary distraction from our own hurts.

**Myth 11:** Strong widows don’t cry in front of others

**Reality:** Baloney! The grieving period is a very emotional time. Widows often feel sad, anxious, depressed, angry, guilty, lonely, and afraid—sometimes all at one time! Needless to say, they are very vulnerable and feeling raw during these times. Widows do not need the added pressure of trying to hold in their emotions. If they need to cry, then they need to give themselves permission to cry, even in front of others. Hopefully, the people around them will understand. And if not, it’s not the widow’s problem—it’s the problem of those who are uncomfortable.

**Myth 12:** Don’t talk about your husband—it only makes things harder

**Reality:** The decision of whether or not to talk about her husband is up to the widow. For some widows, talking about their spouses is part of their healing process. It is an important way to hold onto a lot of good memories during a time of great sadness and loss. Widows sometimes feel they are making other people uncomfortable, or that others do not want to hear these stories. If talking about your spouse is important to you, “just do it.” There are also some widows who prefer not to talk about their husbands. Widows need to educate about what is right or wrong for them.

**Myth 13:** Your married friends will abandon you

**Reality:** This is a very destructive myth that is perpetuated by a great deal of literature for women trying to cope with widowhood. Widows are told that their married friends will no longer be comfortable around them for a variety of reasons—that their friends will be uncomfortable dealing with a grief-stricken person, or will feel like a newly-single woman is a threat to their own marriages, and so on. This is a hurtful and untrue generality that can do a great deal of
damage once it’s planted in a widow’s mind. Harboring the expectation that her friends will dump her in her time of need can change a widow’s behavior enough that expectation turns into self-fulfilling prophecy.

The truth is that your married friends are no more or less likely to drop you than your single friends. Some individuals may become uncomfortable interacting with a widow, this is true, but the key word in this sentence is *individuals*. Your relationships with friends will not die simply because your husband died. Your friendships will function as they have since you were a child, succeeding or failing entirely due to your personality and actions, and the personalities and actions of your friends. Not due to the fact that they still have spouses. Allow yourself to trust that your friends will be there for you, and behave accordingly.

To summarize, if you are a widow, or someone who is trying to help a widow, it is important to break free of these myths and live within the realities of such a painful and devastating loss. Only by doing so can the rebuilding process begin.