

DEVELOPING A NEW SELF IDENTITY

Your personal identity, or self-perception, is the result of the ongoing process of establishing a sense of who you are. Part of your self-identity comes from the relationships you have with other people. When someone with whom you have a relationship dies, your self-identity, or the way you see yourself, naturally changes.

You may have gone from being a “wife” or “husband” to a “widow” or “widower.” You may have gone from being a “parent” to a “bereaved parent.” The way you define yourself and the way society defines you is changed.

A death often requires you to take on new roles that had been filled by the person who died. After all, someone still has to take out the garbage, someone still has to buy the groceries, and someone still has to balance the checkbook. You confront your changed identity every time you do something that used to be done by the person who died. This can be very hard work and, at times, can leave you feeling very drained of emotional, physical and spiritual energy.

You may occasionally feel child-like as you struggle with your changing identity. You may feel a temporarily heightened dependence on others as well as feelings of helplessness, frustration, inadequacy and fear. These feelings can be overwhelming and scary, but they are actually a natural response to this important need of mourning.

Remember—do what you need to do in order to survive, for now, as you try to re-anchor yourself. To be dependent on others as you struggle with a changed identity does not make you bad or inferior. Your self-identity has been assaulted. Be compassionate with yourself. Accept the support of others.

Many people discover that as they work on this need, they ultimately discover some positive aspects of their changed self-identities. You may develop a more caring, kind and sensitive part of your identity that empowers you to go on living even though you continue to feel a sense of loss.

Taken from [The Journey through Grief](#) by Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D.



- What roles have you identified?
- What roles have changed since the person in your life has died?
- What roles did your deceased loved one play in your life?
- How big of a space did the person who died occupy in your life?
- How much time and energy did you devote to other relationships?
- Following the death of your loved one, what roles will you continue to play, what roles will you no longer play, and what new roles will you assume?

