



Elder law: You're a surviving spouse — now what?

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Your spouse has recently died, the funeral has been held and now you're perplexed by some of the things that you should do next. Remember, you do not have to do everything at once. You should start by gathering all information relating to you and your spouse that you can.

Obtain at least 10 death certificates from the funeral home. These will be needed to obtain financial information and to prove your loved one's death. A few extra certificates are well worth the minimal additional expense as they may be needed far into the future. Was there a will? Who is the executor for the estate? You? Do you know what to do in this role?

Gather up your loved one's birth certificate, your marriage license, Social Security information and any information that you may have if your loved one was a veteran as there may be veterans' benefits available to you.

Seek out professional help to assist you — lawyer, financial adviser, etc. If there is a will, does it need to be probated? Schedule a meeting with your lawyer if you have one. You could have a relatively simple or incredibly complex situation as to the estate. A lawyer can help give appropriate direction. This is particularly important if your spouse handled all of the family's financial affairs and you have been in the dark as to what you have and what may be owed to others.

Make a list of all assets, who owns them, who holds them, who are beneficiaries of any retirement plans (often the biggest asset many families have), and beneficiaries of any life insurance policies (the death benefits could also be significant).

Find out from your spouse's employer or former employer, if retired, what benefits there are to which you may be entitled. Was there a pension? Are you entitled to a surviving spouse portion of

that pension? Can you receive health insurance from the former employer? Do you now have to obtain it on your own?

Are you entitled to more from Social Security than solely the \$255 death benefit, which has been the same amount since 1954. Contact the Social Security Administration — 800-772-1213 — to determine how much, if any, of a Social Security monthly benefit you may receive.

Do you know what your ongoing expenses are? Are there outstanding major payments to be made? Are there significant medical bills as a result of your loved one's death? Where is the money to come from to pay these? Again, make a list of both ongoing and significant debts that may be owed. By the way, lists are a good way to focus your thoughts and efforts.

Are you going to have to sell some asset to clear the slate of these debts? Is it even appropriate to pay off these debts now? Try to create a budget so you know what income you will have on a recurring basis and, equally important, what bills you will have on an ongoing basis. Also, work with an adviser to assist you relative to any tax filings that may be necessary, including local, state and federal income taxes.

Do not be pressured into making any major financial decisions unless you're comfortable doing so.

Numerous financial predators are waiting to take advantage of individuals vulnerable and susceptible to their blandishments.

You're going to be in the throes of much emotion, perhaps even depression. You might want to consider a grief counselor or a bereavement group to help you work through the emotional roller coaster. Try not to make any major financial decisions until you have enough financial information to allow you to make informed decisions for your future.

See your own physician. Your health becomes even more important at this time of intense stress.

Finally, when you're in an appropriate frame of mind, start writing down (a good catharsis) your goals and objectives for this next stage of your life.

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