

An Emotional Loss - How to Handle the Financial Aftermath

Twice in the last two weeks and four times in the last few months I've had a client lose a spouse. I cannot imagine the emotional strain. The aftermath of a loved one's death is an extremely difficult time for family and friends. While already coping with many emotions, there are usually financial matters that must be dealt with as well. But there are ways to simplify the process. That's why people like me are here to help.

While it is important to allow time to grieve, it is also imperative to complete certain tasks. So, when ready, here are a couple things to think about should you, or someone you know end up in this unfortunate situation.

- Contact your attorney to review your spouse's will and start the estate settlement process. It will also be important to update your own will, to name new beneficiaries to your estate, and make provisions for the guardianship of minor children, etc.
- Obtain copies of the death certificate as well as your spouse's last Social Security and veterans' benefit statements. There may be government benefits available to you, the survivor, depending on the situation.
- Gather important documents and financial records like birth certificates, marriage certificates, and life insurance policies. Life insurance policies typical have a quick claims process that will provide necessary cash flow for estate settlement and final expenses, let alone survivor income (depending on the amount of the policy). Contact your insurance agent to assist you with the claims process.
- Locate all of your usernames and passwords for your electronic accounts. It will be important to close accounts no longer in use.
- Contact your spouse's employer for information on filing for benefits. Do you yourself have the ability to take time from work, per The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA)?
- Ask an estate attorney whether or not probate will be necessary.
- Remember, you may want to change in your filing status with your tax preparer. You will have the option to file as a "Surviving Spouse."
- Do you need to address your credit situation or establish separate credit?
- Lastly, consider re-titling jointly owned assets to reflect individual ownership and be sure to attach new beneficiary designations or transfer on death instructions.

While the death of a spouse can be an emotional strain, hopefully it isn't a financial strain as well. Over time, it will be important to review your current financial situation. If you don't have help, seek a financial advisor who can help you navigate through this difficult time by assessing your financial situation. This should include an assessment of things like your current income needs and expenses, what to do with proceeds coming from life insurance policies, and what to do with any investments and retirement savings accounts that your spouse may have had.

While important to consider these and other financial questions, it may not be the best time to make major decisions, such as to moving from your current home or retiring. Take some time to think about the goals you and your spouse shared and decide how your goals as an individual may change.

Finally, seek out friends and family to support you during this difficult time. It is the support of these closest friends and family and the help of professionals working on your behalf that will hopefully help to ease the stress of settling these important financial matters during this very emotional time.