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Alone

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Where one lives will depend on whether the widow or widower opts to stay in the same residence, relocate and live alone, move to an adult residence, or move in with relatives or friends.

Frank Mastropietro chose to stay in the same house after his wife of 59 years, Mary, died in 1997. For him, that meant assuming some of the chores that she had previously performed.

"I wash my clothes and cook my own dinner. But sometimes I have trouble making the bed, and the thought that goes through my mind is, 'Mary did that all those years, and you never offered to help her,'" remarked Mastropietro, 85, a parishioner of St. Francis of Assisi in Auburn.

Outside the house, as well, the widow or widower must adjust to a new identity as a single person.

"You go to a church supper and you're not a couple anymore, after 50 or 60 years of being one," said Sister Anne Maloy, RSM, director of Mercy Center with the Aging in Rochester.

"It's different when you're a widow. You're the odd person out," said Loretta Morgan, 56, a parishioner in the Tioga Catholic Community. Her husband of 31 years, Rob, died in 1996.

Practical advice for widows and widowers is available through local and national senior citizen organizations. And, emotional support can be found in bereavement groups and divorced/single widowed coalitions offered through many parishes and community programs.

Ott attended a Beginning Experience weekend in May 2000 at Camp Stella Maris on Conesus Lake. Beginning Experience, an international peer ministry founded by Catholics, serves both Catholic and non-Catholic adults who are separated, divorced or widowed.

"Everyone was working through the same things I was. You could really talk about your feelings, and people understood," said Ott, who is Presbyterian.

Similarly, Morgan has benefitted from the bereavement support group she has attended at her Tioga County parish since 1998.

"The group did help. We could all realize we were in it together," Morgan remarked.

Helpful resources can also be located on the computer. Sister Maloy pointed out "Many (widows and widowers) are getting into the Internet, which is good," she said.

Coping

According to Carl Coloney, there is no set pattern for grappling with the death of a spouse. For example, he said, two women in their 60s from his church — Hope Lutheran in Greece — lost their husbands two days apart and reacted quite differently.

"One stopped going to church. The other sang in the memorial service for her husband," remarked Coloney, who will co-facilitate a workshop, "Dealing with Loss, Grief and Bereavement," at the Hope 2001 Conference on March 31. The event, to be held at Guardian Angels Church in Henrietta, is for Catholics and non-Catholics affected by separation, divorce, bereavement or remarriage.

Only in the past year, Ott said, has she begun coping better with her husband's death. On the other hand, she noted, "One friend of mine lost her husband seven years ago and she's just beginning to come around."

Meanwhile, Morgan said her husband's sudden death five years ago "was a tremendous shock; I'm not through the grieving process yet. Society expects you to get over it in a couple of months."

Coloney observed that the death of a spouse can set off a variety of reactions, depending on the quality of the marriage. He said surviving spouses of abusive mar-



Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer

Frank Mastropietro at his home in Auburn with a photo of his wife, Mary, on March 2.

riages may actually feel relieved, whereas those who felt they didn't live up to their commitment of marriage may feel "guilt and regret mixed together." Others have more positive experiences, living with the spiritual belief that their spouse has gone to heaven.

"The purer the relationship over the years, the less regret you're going to have. What the relationship means to you in life often depends on how you're going to handle it in death," said Coloney, who is on the chaplaincy staff at Rochester's Strong Memorial, Highland and Park Ridge hospitals.

Mastropietro, of Auburn, said he's always taken a positive approach to the death of his wife.

"All I have is joy when I think of Mary. Every night before I go to bed, I talk to her," Mastropietro said. "I don't know what it is, but some nights I look in the other room and think I see her there."

Mastropietro added that he prefers talking about his wife, rather than cover up his feelings: "I'm not private about it. I depend on God, that's all."

Yet Mastropietro is in the minority of men who have lost their spouse, Betty D'Arcy observed.

"The problem with widowers is getting them to admit they could be helped. It's the old macho thing — we've socialized them into thinking they have to be that way," remarked D'Arcy, pastoral associate at the Tioga Catholic Community, who began the cluster's bereavement support group in 1998.

"It's definitely tougher on men because women are more willing to lean on each other," Coloney said. "I see guys who say 'No, I'm a loner and I'll deal with it myself.' I don't know if it's because they're independent, or that they don't want to admit they're weak."

Coloney emphasized that people who are widowed, male or female, should take action, perhaps through professional counseling, rather than deny that they're struggling.

"Some people drink, some commit suicide. Others decide to do something about it, to go out and seek the support of others," Coloney said.

"One of the basics is to admit you're going through it," he emphasized. "The healthiest way to get through grief is to deal with it."

Yet even when a widow or widower is ready to "deal with it," Morgan has discovered that the same may not hold true for that person's friends and acquaintances.

"Other people don't know what to say to you," she said. "People would see me at the store and duck down the other aisle. You understand it, but it hurts. Sometimes you feel like a leper."

Even family members, Ott added, may not know how to connect with a widowed person's feelings.

"They mean to help you, but they don't always understand," Ott said.

Moving on

Things began to look up for Ott, she recalled, after a friend invited her to Beginning Experience. During the weekend, she said, she engaged in numerous small-group discussions with others who were experiencing loss.

"No matter how different you thought you were, if you expressed something there were others who felt the same way," Ott said.

After that weekend, Ott said, she began taking part in more community activities. She now volunteers frequently at her community senior citizens' center, and takes an art course as well.

"I do pretty well in it. It's something I've always wanted to do, but never had the time to do," she said.

Ott added that she will always love and miss her husband, but not in such a way that it immobilizes her. "I think people have to say 'Well, it's time to go out and do more things,'" she remarked.

However, Ott strongly suggested that people who are recently widowed take time to cope with their feelings before starting a regular routine of social activities. "The first year is a very hard year be-

cause you're grieving so much," she said.

How soon this re-entry into society occurs will "depend on how active the person was before," said Colleen Donnellan, a parishioner at St. Charles Borromeo in Greece and team member with Beginning Experience of Rochester. Donnellan said that the process is usually shorter for people who already have numerous friends and activities.

Ott said she now enjoys going out with friends who, more often than not, are widowed as well. Though she has three daughters who live nearby and has considered moving in with one of them, she prefers to live alone and would favor an adult residence if her health became an issue.

"I'd rather pay my own way. I don't want to interfere with their lives," she explained.

The increased versatility of men's and women's roles in society, Donnellan said, allows people to enter widowhood with a higher degree of independence. "There's been a big change in attitude. You've been more of an equal partner," said Donnellan, who will serve as a facilitator at the upcoming Hope 2001 Conference.

But not in all cases, Coloney said.

"I've seen situations where one spouse took care of everything. People then get angry at their spouses for dying on them," he remarked. "It's really difficult when one assumes all the responsibilities."

Morgan, who is physically disabled, said she struggled at first to assume the roles her husband formerly held — but she now feels that she's made a successful transition.

"I had to learn how to write a check, and the first car that was ever in my name was after my husband died," Morgan said. "I'm amazed at how much I can do now. In the beginning I know I made some very bad decisions — but at the time, it was the best I could do."

Morgan enjoys socializing with members of her bereavement group; has increased her attendance at town meetings; and is currently training through her parish to become a Stephen Minister. When her training is completed, she looks forward to getting re-involved with the bereavement group.

"I want to go back to show people I survived," she said.

Planning a retirement? Get a job!

You may be retiring, but that doesn't mean you want to leave the work force. In fact, some people find that not having to work for a regular paycheck takes off the pressure often felt at a job and transforms the work experience into a pleasurable one, according to several sources.

Retirement experts note that there are many benefits to working after you retire, but there are also some drawbacks to consider.

On the plus side, working can ensure regular contact with people; gives you the feeling of being needed; and gives you the knowledge that you're still contributing to society. On the minus side, however, working can affect your income in ways you might not anticipate.

For example, holding a paying job can affect your Social Security benefits as well as your taxes. You can still get Social Security benefits if you work, but they may be reduced if your income exceeds the allowable limit. Earnings over the limit can also affect your family members' benefits.

On that note, before you take a post-retirement job, call your local Social Security office to find out the latest regulations and the implications for your benefits. Also, check with your accountant or tax advisor to determine tax implications.

Some retirees may fear being discriminated against because of their

age. However, there are signs of hope for those who want to keep working as they age.

For example, by 2005, an estimated 40 percent of the U.S. work force will be workers 45 years or older. Also, several large corporations are hiring older workers in larger numbers.

In part, this is because employers consistently report that older workers are experienced, dependable, responsible and productive. Older workers reportedly take less sick time and are more loyal to companies than their younger counterparts as well.

As for where to work and what positions to take, experts advise considering working where you've always wanted to but couldn't for various reasons, including low pay. You may also want to continue working for your employer on a part-time basis or as a consultant.

Finally, you can consider full- or part-time volunteering instead of working, and use the talents and skills you developed on the job to help people in your community.

Sources: LIFESPAN, an agency based in Monroe County; "About... Enjoying Retirement," a pamphlet produced by the MetLife Consumer Education Center and cosponsored by the U.S. Administration on Aging; the National Council on Aging; and John S. Morgan's "Getting a Job After 50."

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