

# Loss of the ‘Supplementary Spouse’ in Marriages in Later Life

By Erlene Rosowsky

When problems arise in a marriage of many years (marriage here refers to all long-term relationships of committed life partners), one cannot help but ask, Why now? What has happened to challenge and stress the marital bond? What challenge with which they cannot cope is the couple facing now? Is the challenge itself so daunting, or rather, are the resources available to address it inadequate? After all, the couple has a long history of individual and dyadic coping that has been strengthened and refined over the years, and has been applied to numerous challenges. So why now?

As a clinician, I often train a diagnostic lens on the individual, appraising what change might have served as precipitant to the current distress. The same questions can be posed when looking at a couple. Is there a new personal challenge for one of the partners? A change in medical condition or medication? Or did something happen to the couple to engender the distress? Has the couple been unsettled by a move, perhaps? Or retirement from work?

These frequently occurring events in older age can contribute to structural changes within a marriage, often of sufficient power to cause

---

*An important but often unrecognized relationship must be taken into account.*

---

distress in one or both spouses. The clinical literature addressing these events is extensive. The theme of loss and its impact on the marriage is of continuing importance in later life—most significant, of course, with the

eventual death of a spouse.

There are, however, other losses, often connected to transitional events, that are powerful yet less well identified as contributors to significant structural change in the marriage in later life. These are para-spousal losses, that is, losses of a significant person who plays a very important role in the life of one of the partners in the couple, but is not the spouse—thus the idea of the “supplementary spouse.”

While many, perhaps most, marriages in later life are most fittingly thought of as dyads, some are more appropriately described as triads. An apt metaphor could be that of a tripod, a frame with three legs supporting something, in this case a marriage, wherein sturdiness and stability rely on functional intactness of all three legs. In these marriages, the supplementary spouse is the third leg of the tripod.

While the specific relationships are different, all supplementary spouses serve a common function of supporting the marriage. When this crit-

ical support is lost, the effect is to bring stress upon the marriage. Consider the supplementary spouse as a supporting beam in a building structure. If this beam becomes damaged or collapses, the consequence can be that the entire structure becomes damaged or collapses. Sometimes the loss of a supplementary spouse is behind the presenting problems that come to clinical attention.

The major functions of marriage in older age (truly, at any age) are collaboration, companionship, support, intimacy, and self-continuity; the supplementary spouse serves to fulfill these functions well. The supplementary spouse, thus, is an integral segment of the marital triad. Included in this collection of relationships, among others, are the long-term lover, the intimate friend and confidante, the work companion, the “work wife,” and the “recreational buddy.”

In the case of the long-term lover, an affair often develops over the years into a “parallel marriage” with defined rules, roles, and responsibilities and the lover now aparallel. What begins as a relationship outside the primary marriage evolves, over the long term, into a parallel marriage defined as a committed life-partner relationship. Over time, the edges of the two marriages—once having been parallel, maintaining a constant distance apart and thus never meeting—often become increasingly comparable and, not unusually, meet and cross.

Loss of the parallel spouse can have an enormous impact on the primary marriage. An unsanctioned, hidden bereavement occurs; it cannot be comforted by the primary spouse, or possibly by anyone, as it has been held secret. From another perspective, it is not uncommon for the parallel spouse to provide support—often concrete and direct—when the primary spouse functionally begins to fail. The parallel spouse may become a *de facto* case manager for a primary spouse who increasingly needs care as a dementing disorder progresses, for example.

Marriages also can be greatly stressed upon loss of a special friend of one of the spouses. It is not unusual for a friend to have become a supplementary spouse, for example, when one’s primary spouse is unable (for any reason) to be present, engaged, and emotionally supportive.

Frequently a special friend becomes a confidante and fulfills these functions. When this special friend is lost, the one left behind turns to the primary spouse seeking to replace this emotional support, and once again is left wanting. The spouse who is unable to provide this support and fill the vacant role is left feeling bewildered and inadequate.

The work companion and “work wife” are other supplementary spouses who can provide a frame for self-continuity, which typically comes to an abrupt end with retirement. I treated a man for a reactive depression after he lost his supplementary spouse when he entered retirement—even though he had been looking forward to retiring. For over forty years, he had car-pooled with another man who worked in the same office. They traveled to and from work; an hour’s drive each way. They had spent ten hours each week together, for over forty years, talking, sharing their lives, hopes, dreams, and demons. They had not developed a pattern of socializing outside of work; their relationship was strictly work-bound, and so when retirement occurred, they each lost, at the least, a most special friend. For my patient, his friend had evolved into a supplementary spouse who came to know more about what he held in his heart than did his wife. Raising a family, working long hours to earn a living, had left them—the primary pair—“running on automatic,” with little time alone dedicated to cultivating the kind of intimacy he had developed with his friend.

Another common phenomenon is the emergence of a “work wife”—someone at work who is counted on for “wifely duties” for his or her boss (a “work wife” can be of either sex). Occasionally the “work wife” will evolve into a lover, but that is not the usual script. However, over the years, being together eight or more (waking!) hours a day, the work wife can become a supplementary spouse. When this relationship is lost, it is less the performance of “duties” that are missed than it is the valued reflection of one’s being competent and powerful, especially when this is not the same mirror held up by the spouse at home, and especially for those individuals who in the main define themselves by their work role.

The function of self-continuity is often in part

secured through a supplementary spousal role assumed in older age by a long-term “recreational buddy.” The “golf widow” refers to a spouse who is left behind when one goes off to play the game. Loss of one’s long-term recreational buddy can result in a feeling of being widowed, and a deep grief can ensue. This

means not only the loss of the person or the loss of support of self-continuity, but also the recognition of no longer being a player, of being at the end of the game. ❧

*Erlene Rosowsky, Psy.D., is assistant professor of psychiatry, Harvard Medical School, and a clinical psychologist in Needham, Mass.*