

Grief Retreats FAQ

Madawaska Valley Hospice Palliative Care

We know signing up for a grief retreat can feel like a big step, especially if you aren't quite sure what to expect. Here are some of the questions we hear most often.

WHO CAN ATTEND?

Who are the retreats for?

Our retreats are for people who have experienced the death of a spouse or partner. The Men's Grief Retreat is for widowed men, and the Widowed Women Grief Retreat is for widowed women.

Do I have to live in your area to attend?

No. Our retreats are open to anyone in Ontario.

You do not need to live in Renfrew County or within the Madawaska Valley Hospice Palliative Care service area. Last year, we even had someone travel from Timmins to attend.

Do I have to be a client of Madawaska Valley Hospice Palliative Care?

Not at all.

Attendance is not limited to our hospice caseload. You do not need a referral, and you do not need to have received hospice services before.

Did my spouse or partner have to die in hospice?

No. Your spouse or partner did not have to receive hospice or palliative care, and they did not have to die in a hospice setting.

They may have died at home, in hospital, in long term care, in hospice or somewhere else. The circumstances of their death do not determine whether you can attend.

These retreats are about your experience of living after the death of your spouse or partner.

How long ago does my spouse or partner need to have died?

There is no required timeline.

Some people may be relatively new in their grief, while others may have been widowed for several years. Grief does not follow a schedule.

Am I too young or too old to attend?

No.

Widowed people of all adult ages and stages of life are welcome. Losing a spouse or partner can be isolating at any age.

WHAT CAN I EXPECT?

What are some of the things we will talk about?

We'll talk about grief in a very practical and down to earth way. Some of our conversations and activities may explore:

- What grief can actually look and feel like
- Life after the death of your spouse or partner
- Telling your story and remembering your person
- The secondary losses that can come with the death of a spouse, including changes in identity, friendships, routines, finances, roles, plans and your sense of the future
- Loneliness and changes in your social world
- The things other people say and do that are helpful, and sometimes not so helpful

- Coping with difficult days and moments
- Recognizing small wins, even when life still feels very different
- Finding the people who can be your cheerleaders and supports
- Learning to carry grief while continuing to live
- What moving forward can mean without leaving your person behind
- Making room for laughter, connection, hope and good moments alongside grief

You will never be expected to have all the answers or to be at a certain place in your grief. Much of the retreat is simply about being around other widowed people and having conversations that can be difficult to have anywhere else.

What if I have never attended a grief group before?

That's completely okay.

You do not need any previous experience with grief groups, counselling or hospice programs to attend.

For some participants, the retreat may be the first time they have ever sat in a room with other people who have also experienced the death of a spouse or partner.

We will guide you through the retreat and let you know what to expect along the way.

What if I don't know anyone?

That's okay. Many people arrive not knowing anyone.

One of the most important parts of the retreat is having the opportunity to meet other people who understand this kind of loss. You may arrive as strangers, but you already have something important in common.

Do I have to be comfortable talking about grief?

No. That's part of why we are here.

Talking about the person who died and about life since their death can feel unfamiliar, especially if you don't have many places in your everyday life where those conversations happen.

You can participate at your own pace. There will be opportunities to talk, listen, reflect and simply be present.

Will I have to share my story?

You will be invited to participate, but you are always in control of how much you choose to share.

There is no expectation that you talk about anything you aren't comfortable sharing.

Sometimes listening is participating too.

What if I get emotional?

That's okay.

Tears are welcome. So is laughter. So are quiet moments. Grief can hold all of those things at the same time.

You never need to apologize for having a difficult moment at our retreats.

Is this group therapy?

No.

These are grief retreats focused on education, reflection, connection, story sharing and peer support. They are not a replacement for counselling, therapy or medical care.

Will we talk about grief the entire time?

Definitely not!

There will be grief education and meaningful conversations, but there will also be good food, time outdoors, activities, wellness opportunities, laughter, quiet time and simply being together.

Sometimes the most meaningful moments happen over a cup of coffee, during a meal, beside the lake or in a conversation you weren't expecting.

Is it going to be sad the entire time?

There will certainly be sad moments. We're talking about people we love who have died.

But grief isn't only sadness.

There is often laughter, storytelling, good food, new friendships and moments of genuine fun. You may hear people talking about their person one minute and laughing together the next.

Both belong.

Why is connecting with other widowed people such a big part of the retreat?

Because grief can be incredibly isolating.

Friends and family may care deeply about you and still not fully understand what it is like to lose the person you shared your everyday life with.

Being with other widowed people can mean having conversations that require less explaining. Sometimes simply hearing someone else say, "Me too," can be incredibly powerful.

What if I need some time by myself during the retreat?

That's okay.

Retreats can be emotionally full, and sometimes you may need a little quiet time. There will be opportunities to step away, spend some time outside, sit by the lake or simply take a few minutes for yourself.

Taking care of yourself is part of participating.

EVERYONE'S GRIEF LOOKS DIFFERENT

What if my spouse or partner died suddenly or unexpectedly?

You are welcome.

People come to the retreats with many different experiences. A spouse or partner may have died following a long illness, suddenly, unexpectedly or under difficult circumstances.

You do not need to have had a particular type of loss to belong here.

What if I still feel very married or don't like calling myself a widow or widower?

That's okay too.

You don't have to use any particular word to describe yourself. Some people are comfortable with the words widow or widower, while others aren't.

What matters is that you have experienced the death of your spouse or partner.

What if I have started dating or have a new partner?

You are still welcome.

Beginning a new relationship does not erase the person who died or mean that grief has disappeared. Life after the death of a spouse can hold many different experiences, relationships and emotions.

There is no expectation that everyone attending will be in the same place in their life.

Are the retreats LGBTQ+ friendly?

Yes. Absolutely.

A spouse is a spouse, and a partner is a partner, regardless of gender or sexual orientation.

Our retreats are welcoming and inclusive spaces. LGBTQ+ widowed people are welcome here, and your relationship, your person and your grief will be treated with the same care and respect as everyone else's.

You should never have to wonder whether your love or your loss belongs in the room.

All are welcome here.

Will everyone have had the same experience as me?

No, and that's actually part of what makes these retreats meaningful.

Every relationship is different. Every death is different. Every person's grief is different.

We aren't coming together because our stories are identical. We are coming together because there are parts of losing a spouse or partner that other widowed people often understand in a way that others simply can't.

Can I come with a friend who has also been widowed?

Absolutely.

If you have a friend who has also experienced the death of a spouse or partner, you are welcome to register together.

I'm nervous about coming. Is that normal?

Very.

Walking into a retreat where you may not know anyone and knowing that grief will be part of the conversation can feel uncomfortable.

You won't be the only person arriving with some nerves. We work hard to create a welcoming, relaxed environment where you can participate at your own pace.

I attended last year. Should I come back again?

Absolutely.

Grief changes over time, and so do you. Where you are in your grief this year may look very different from where you were last year. You may be facing different secondary losses, asking different questions, noticing new challenges or feeling ready to explore things that you weren't ready for before.

That means you may hear something completely differently the second time around.

While some important parts of the retreat remain the same, much of the experience changes from year to year. We introduce new activities, conversations, facilitators and opportunities for reflection. The people in the room also change, and with them come completely different stories, perspectives and connections.

Even the familiar pieces can feel different because you are coming back as a different version of yourself.

You may also discover that something you needed desperately during your first retreat isn't what you need anymore, while something you barely noticed the first time suddenly speaks directly to where you are now.

There can also be something meaningful about returning with experience behind you. You remember what it felt like to walk through those doors for the first time, and your presence may quietly help someone who is doing that this year.

There is no graduation from grief and no point where you should have learned everything there is to learn.

If you attended before and feel drawn to come back, you are very welcome.

THE RETREATS

What is the Men's Grief Retreat?

The Men's Grief Retreat is a one day retreat on October 15, 2026, from 8:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. at Stevenson's Lodge in Combermere.

The day includes grief education, story sharing, conversations about life since the death, secondary losses, small wins, outdoor activities and time spent with other men who have experienced the death of a spouse or partner.

Breakfast, lunch and supper are included.

Cost: \$75

What is the Widowed Women Grief Retreat?

The Widowed Women Grief Retreat takes place October 16 to 18, 2026 at Stevenson's Lodge in Combermere.

The weekend includes grief education, story sharing, conversations about secondary losses and life after loss, reflection, wellness opportunities, time outdoors, good food and lots of opportunities to connect with other widowed women.

Meals throughout the retreat are included.

Cost: \$195

Why is there a cost if Madawaska Valley Hospice Palliative Care is a not for profit organization?

Almost all of the programs and services offered by Madawaska Valley Hospice Palliative Care are provided at no cost. Our grief retreats are currently our only fee for service program.

Retreats are also very expensive to run. There are costs for the venue, meals, supplies, facilitators, activities, wellness opportunities and all of the pieces that go into creating a full retreat experience.

Our goal is not to make money from the retreats. The registration fee helps offset some of the costs and allows us to continue offering them in a sustainable way.

The fee also represents a commitment to attend. Retreat spaces are limited, and a great deal of planning, food, supplies and programming are prepared for each registered participant. We have found that asking participants to make a financial commitment helps reduce last minute cancellations and ensures that these limited spaces are being held for people who genuinely plan to attend.

For the Men's Grief Retreat, the fee is \$75, including the full day of programming, breakfast, lunch and supper.

For the Widowed Women Grief Retreat, the fee is \$195, including the weekend programming, meals, activities and wellness opportunities.

We work hard to keep the fees as reasonable as possible while still making these retreats something we can continue to offer.

What are the wellness opportunities at the women's retreat?

Participants will have an opportunity to experience a variety of short wellness sessions. These may include Indian Head Massage, seated massage, Therapeutic Touch®, Reiki, reflexology, acupuncture and yoga.

You can choose what feels comfortable for you.

Do I have to stay overnight for the women's retreat?

The retreat programming takes place throughout the weekend. Accommodations are arranged separately from retreat registration.

There are cottages available at Stevenson's Lodge as well as other accommodation options in the surrounding area. We can provide more information when you register.

What should I bring?

Registered participants will receive more detailed information before the retreat, including what to bring, accommodation information and what to expect.

Mostly, just come as you are.

Where are the retreats held?

Both retreats take place at Stevenson's Lodge in Combermere, Ontario, in a relaxed rural setting surrounded by nature and the lake.

HOW DO I REGISTER OR ASK QUESTIONS?

Contact Madawaska Valley Hospice Palliative Care.

Email: bereavementmvhospice@sfmhosp.com

Phone: 613-756-3045 ext. 350

Still wondering if the retreat is right for you?

Reach out.

You don't have to figure that out on your own. We are happy to talk with you, answer your questions and help you decide whether the retreat feels like a good fit for you.