

TAKING CONTROL OF YOUR FINANCES

Help for surviving spouses

Figuring out how to manage your finances, while grieving a spouse, may feel overwhelming. This step-by-step guide is designed to help you do the most important and pressing things first.



In this guide you will find:

- 1 Financial checklist
- 2 First steps
- 3 Bills worksheet
- 4 Next steps
- 5 Asset worksheets
- 6 Important documents to gather
- 7 Where to get help

You are not alone

The death of a spouse or partner is one of life's most stressful events. You don't need to go through it alone. To locate a grief counselor, join a bereavement support group, or find other support, visit the [Eldercare Locator](#) to find your Area Agency on Aging and other local resources



1 Financial checklist

FIRST Request 10-12 certified copies of the death certificate

Find the will and estate information, and determine the executor/legal representative/administrator and beneficiaries

NOTIFY Social Security Administration (SSA)

Department of Veterans Affairs to determine eligibility for benefits if your spouse served in the military

Human Resources Department at your spouse's employer and former employers and spouse's union, if they had one

Insurance: life, health, auto

Banks and credit unions

Pensions and retirement accounts

Mortgage broker or property manager

UPDATE Bills and utilities

**CHANGE/
CLOSE** Online accounts, social media, and email

Memberships, subscriptions, prescriptions

DETERMINE Debts and assets

GATHER Important documents



2 First steps

Death certificates

- Request 10-12 certified copies of the death certificate from the funeral home. If you're not working with a funeral home, you can place an order for certified death certificates from your local Department of Health.
 - Life insurance companies, creditors, your bank or credit union, or other companies may require you to provide a physical copy of the death certificate. Others may accept electronic copies.
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Social Security Administration (SSA)

- Notify SSA of your spouse's death.
 - If your spouse was receiving benefits, SSA does not pay them for the month of their death. So, if your spouse died in July and a payment was issued in August which is the payment for July, that payment will need to be returned to SSA. To avoid this, contact SSA right away. You need to find out when benefits will end, if money will be reclaimed, and when.
 - Ask if you are eligible to receive a death benefit, which is a one-time lump sum payment paid to surviving spouses who qualify.
 - Ask if you are eligible for on-going monthly survivor benefits. If you have a dependent child, ask about survivor benefits for the child too.
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Spouse's will and/or living trust (if they had one)

- If your spouse had a will, it may need to go through a court process called probate. For free information about the probate process in your state, or to find legal assistance in your area, visit [LawHelp.org](https://www.lawhelp.org).
- If you are the executor of your spouse's will, (the individual named in the will as the person to carry out the wishes of the deceased) you are legally responsible for making sure your spouse's debts are paid from the estate and that remaining assets are properly distributed to heirs identified in the will.
- If you are not the executor of your spouse's will the named executor should contact you.

Insurance

- Ask who is listed as beneficiary on your spouse's life insurance policy. Find out how benefits are paid.
- If you were covered through your spouse's medical or dental insurance, ask about keeping this insurance coverage. Find out if the insurance providers can help with funeral expenses.

Make a new budget

- When a spouse dies, there might be big changes to your income and expenses. Once you know what will change and by how much, make a new budget. You can use the bills worksheet as a guide.
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Notify your bank or credit union about your spouse's death.

- Your spouse's financial institutions can transfer the money from their accounts to a beneficiary.
 - If you named your spouse as your beneficiary, you may need to name a new beneficiary. It's a good idea to make sure that your beneficiary is still who you want it to be.
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Help is available

- Determine if working with a **financial advisor, attorney, or other professional** makes sense for you.
- You may want to work with a financial advisor or lawyer if your **spouse's estate was particularly large**, included business interests or other complex assets, or there are disagreements concerning the will.
- You **may not need to hire a professional** but if you're feeling overwhelmed, they may be able to help.
- **You may qualify for free legal help.** Visit [LawHelp.org](https://www.lawhelp.org) to find free legal aid programs in your state.



3 Bills worksheet

 List your bills, the amount due, and the due date. Then pay the bills. Below are possible monthly bills you may be responsible for. You can use the bill worksheet as a guide.

- Housing (mortgage or rent)
- Cell phone
- Electricity
- Gas
- Water/trash/sewer
- Homeowner Association (HOA) dues
- Home insurance
- Property taxes
- Cable/Internet
- Car loan
- Student loan
- Credit cards

When dealing with debts, remember:

- You are usually **not responsible for a spouse's debt**. But it depends on the laws in your state. In some states (with community property or necessities laws), spouses can be responsible for certain marital debts.
- You **are responsible if the debt is also yours**. For instance, if you borrowed the money as a co-signer or you were joint account owners, then you may share responsibility for the debt with your spouse's estate. An estate includes the money and property that someone owned when they died.
- If you are the **executor, administrator, or personal representative** for your spouse's estate, this means you **must use estate assets to settle your loved one's debts**. It does not make you responsible for paying the debt with your own money.
- **Help is available**. These rules can be hard to navigate, especially when you've recently lost a spouse. Visit [AskCFPB](#) to learn more about dealing with debt after a loved one dies or to find a lawyer. **You may qualify for free legal services**. Visit [LawHelp.org](#) to find free legal aid programs in your state.



4 Next Steps

 Review your bank or credit union account statements carefully for recurring charges.

- If you want to cancel an automatic payment from an account where you keep your money, contact the company to request that they stop these charges. After that, contact your bank or credit union and tell them that these charges are no longer authorized. Then, give your bank a 'stop payment order.

 Be sure to update information with insurance companies and utility companies.

 Remember that you will need to file your spouse's tax return for the year of passing. That can be complicated, so you may want to work with a professional.

 **Review and update your own estate planning documents including your will, any medical power of attorney designations, and other arrangements such as trusts.**

- If your spouse was a named beneficiary, make sure you name a new beneficiary.
- If you have dependents (children, grandchildren, or parents), you can plan for their continued care or guardianship in the event that you're unable to provide care. You can also plan for the care of any pets.
- If your spouse owned any businesses, consider contacting an attorney or financial advisor to learn what steps are needed to transition or otherwise dissolve those businesses.

 **Review online accounts.**

- If you have access to your late spouse's email account, you may be able to locate information about bills, subscriptions, etc. When you no longer require access to this account, it's best to close the account to help prevent identity theft.
- Delete or memorialize social media accounts.



Change or cancel clubs and memberships that are in your spouse's name.

- Change the memberships you want to keep to your name only, and cancel the ones you don't want or need. If you cancel a long-term membership, you may need to keep paying dues until the membership term ends.



Obtain a copy of your late spouse's credit report.

- Notify the three credit reporting agencies (Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion) of your partner's death and ask for copy of their credit report.
- This will help you identify accounts and debts in your partner's name and will also prevent people from opening fraudulent accounts in your partner's name.



5 Asset worksheets

 Create an inventory of assets. Knowing how much you have in various accounts will help you develop and stick to a budget. Your new inventory will help you update your heirs. You can use these assets worksheets as guides. Keep in mind the following:

- Checking accounts
- Savings accounts
- Retirement accounts (401K, 403B, Roth IRA, IRA)
- Bonds
- Annuities
- Life Insurance
- Real estate
- Physical assets (jewelry, art, etc.)
- Vehicles (cars, boats, motorcycles)

Reminder

You may qualify for free legal help. Visit [LawHelp.org](https://www.lawhelp.org) to find free legal aid programs in your state.



6 Important documents to gather

Gather important documents in a secure box or filing cabinet. These documents may help you manage your finances after the loss of your spouse. They may also help your loved ones if they need to find them in the future.

- Will/trust
- Life insurance policy(s)
- Your spouse's birth certificate
- Marriage certificate
- Death certificates
- Social security cards for both of you
- Tax returns
- Statements for bank or investment accounts
- Pension/retirement plan statements
- Loan statements
- Mortgages
- Leases
- Deeds
- Motor vehicle titles
- Car insurance documents
- Homeowner's insurance documents
- Health insurance
- Safe deposit box information and key
- Documents for any of spouse's partially owned businesses
- Military service records

Tips

- **Scan important documents** and save them in a password-protected file. If you don't own a scanner, you can take photos of the documents and save them electronically in a password protected folder. If you lose your papers, this file can help you recover essential information.
- **Locate** and **review** the contents of any safe deposit boxes held in your spouse's name.
- **Important documents** such as car titles, house deeds, and stock certificates are often in joint safe deposit boxes. You may forget about them after several years. If you believe your spouse had a safe deposit box but are not sure where it is located, try calling the financial institutions where you and your spouse held accounts.

7 Where to find help

CREDIT BUREAUS

Experian

888-397-3742

[experian.com](https://www.experian.com)

Equifax

888-378-4329

[equifax.com](https://www.equifax.com)

TransUnion

800-916-8800

[transunion.com](https://www.transunion.com)

SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION (SSA)

800-772-1213

[ssa.gov/locator](https://www.ssa.gov/locator)

Survivors' benefits

[ssa.gov/benefits/survivors](https://www.ssa.gov/benefits/survivors)

FAQ

[faq.ssa.gov/en-us/Topic/article/KA-02083](https://www.faq.ssa.gov/en-us/Topic/article/KA-02083)

Benefits calculator

[ssa.gov/OACT/anypia/index.html](https://www.ssa.gov/OACT/anypia/index.html)

VETERANS AFFAIRS

VA main information line

800-MYVA411 (698-2411)

[va.gov](https://www.va.gov)

VA benefits hotline

800-827-1000

VA health benefits hotline

877-222-8387

Federal benefits for veterans, dependents and survivors

[va.gov/opa/publications/benefits_book/2019_Federal_Benefits_for_Veterans_Dependents_and_survivors.pdf](https://www.va.gov/opa/publications/benefits_book/2019_Federal_Benefits_for_Veterans_Dependents_and_survivors.pdf)

INTERNAL REVENUE SERVICE (IRS)

800-829-1040

[irs.gov](https://www.irs.gov)

Internal Revenue Service (telephone assistance)

[irs.gov/help/telephone-assistance](https://www.irs.gov/help/telephone-assistance)

Internal Revenue Service (local)

[irs.gov/help/contact-your-local-irs-office](https://www.irs.gov/help/contact-your-local-irs-office)

LEGAL AID

Legal Services Corporation

[lsc.gov/about-lsc/what-legal-aid/get-legal-help](https://www.lsc.gov/about-lsc/what-legal-aid/get-legal-help)

LawHelp

[lawhelp.org/find-help](https://www.lawhelp.org/find-help)

FINANCIAL COUNSELING

Department of Justice's list of approved credit counseling agencies

[justice.gov/ust/list-credit-counseling-agencies-approved-pursuant-11-usc-111](https://www.justice.gov/ust/list-credit-counseling-agencies-approved-pursuant-11-usc-111)

HOUSING COUNSELING

Housing counseling agencies approved by U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)

[consumerfinance.gov/find-a-housing-counselor](https://www.consumerfinance.gov/find-a-housing-counselor)

ELDERCARE LOCATOR

Connecting you to services for older adults and their families, from the U.S. Administration on Aging

800-677-1116

[Eldercare.acl.gov](https://www.eldercare.acl.gov)

The content in this guide provides general consumer information. It is not legal advice or regulatory guidance. The CFPB updates this information periodically. This information may include links or references to third-party resources or content. We do not endorse the third-party or guarantee the accuracy of this third-party information. There may be other resources that also serve your needs.



Online

consumerfinance.gov



By phone

(855) 411-CFPB (2372)

(855) 729-CFPB (2372) TTY/TDD