

LOSS, LONELINESS, AND HEALING: HOW OLDER ADULTS EXPERIENCE AND OVERCOME GRIEF



Grief is a natural response to loss, encompassing a range of emotional, physical, and psychological reactions. For older adults, the experience of grief can be particularly complex due to the accumulation of losses and the unique challenges associated with aging.

UNDERSTANDING GRIEF IN OLDER ADULTS

As individuals age, they may encounter multiple significant losses within a short timeframe. For instance, the death of a spouse can lead to not only the loss of a life partner but also changes in financial stability and social connections. Additionally, aging often brings about other forms of loss, such as declining health, reduced independence, and the conclusion of long-held roles like career positions. Sometimes, losses in different areas of life can come in quick succession, not leaving a person enough time to process any individual loss. These cumulative losses can result in what researchers refer to as "bereavement overload", an effect that can be overwhelming.

PHYSICAL AND COGNITIVE IMPACTS

Grief can manifest physically in older adults, exacerbating existing health conditions and leading to new concerns. Appetite changes are common; many older individuals already experience decreased appetite, which can be further diminished during bereavement, sometimes resulting in skipped meals or prolonged periods without eating.

Check out the next page for more information about living with grief.

Cognitively, grief may intensify confusion, forgetfulness, disorientation, and disorganization. When combined with the stress of financial pressures, especially after the loss of a spouse, these cognitive challenges can lead to significant difficulties.

SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS

Social isolation is a prevalent issue among older adults and can be intensified by the loss of loved ones. This heightened sense of loneliness not only affects emotional well-being but also poses risks to physical health. Studies have shown that social isolation can increase the risk of premature death, and the U.S. surgeon general famously declared in 2023 that loneliness poses health risks comparable to those of smoking 15 cigarettes per day.

SUPPORTING GRIEVING OLDER ADULTS

Providing support to older adults experiencing grief involves several key actions:

- **Companionship:** Spending time together, whether through shared activities or regular communication, can alleviate feelings of loneliness and reduce the negative effects of social isolation.
- **Therapy:** In some cases, grief can trigger serious mental health challenges like depression and anxiety. Referring a struggling loved one to a therapist or a mental health program can help them learn the skills to cope with their grief and manage other mental health burdens.
- **Open Conversations:** Encouraging discussions about the deceased loved one can validate the grieving person's feelings and assist in processing the loss.
- **Assistance with Daily Tasks:** Offering help with routine activities can ease the burden during a challenging time and ensure that the individual's basic needs are met.

Recognizing the distinct ways in which older adults experience grief is essential for providing effective support. By acknowledging their unique challenges and offering compassionate assistance, we can help older individuals navigate the complex journey of loss with dignity and care.

WE CAN HELP.

Our hospital-based outpatient program is designed to meet the unique needs of older adults experiencing depression and/or anxiety related to life changes that are often associated with aging or a chronic diagnosis. Anyone can make a referral to our program, including self-referrals, provider referrals, or community consultations.

Call us today at