

When You Grieve in the Senior Years *Understanding Your Unique Grief*

The world has changed remarkably during our lifetimes. Many of the events and achievements that have marked our era were not even dreamed in the wildest imaginations of our parents. One of the nice benefits of growing older is having been a witness to so much history. The things our children and grandchildren read about in books, we saw first-hand!

But, one of the difficulties of growing into the senior years is that we find ourselves saying goodbye more frequently than ever. The emotions, physical sensations, thoughts, and spiritual questions that accompany these losses are what we call grief. This grief is the collection of experiences we live through whenever we say goodbye to a cherished relationship or possession.

*A hard part of growing older
is having to say goodbye more
frequently than ever*

Depending on the nature of your relationship with the person who died, you might feel somewhat like you have lost your mind. You might feel like you are in a fog or performing like a robot. These are some of the reasons most experts advise grieving people to avoid making major life decisions like selling your home or changing jobs in the first year or so of bereavement.

The emotions of grief are varied and no two people grieve quite the same. Many people in grief experience anger, guilt, fear, sadness, and loneliness. You may experience any of these or all of these—but grief has no real “timetables” or predictable stages. It is a highly personal process that you must learn to manage.

The death of a mate is one of the more common experiences in later life. When we said, “until death do us part,” we could not imagine the pain that would accompany that parting. If you’re like many of us in later life, you have built much of your life around this person who has now died, having married him or her four, five, or six decades ago.

While not the most common experience for seniors, the death of a child occurs in more families than one would realize. Adult children get sick and are involved in accidents. This loss is particularly hard to reconcile because we are conditioned to believe that parents should never bury their children. Regardless of the age of a child, his or her death is a devastating loss.

As we grow older, we find ourselves attending—or staying away from—more and more funerals. One 84-year old widowed gentleman told his bereavement support group at the senior center, “It seems I’m going to a funeral every week now. I keep wondering who’ll be next and if anyone will still be around to come to mine.”

Of course, not every loss in our senior years is related to death. We often contend with the loss of physical abilities, drivers license, family home, independence, sight or hearing, and a host of other elements of daily life we used to take for granted.

Myths abound in our society about grief and what is or is not “normal.” Some of your well-meaning friends and family members have likely advised you to just “get on with your life.” Unfortunately, this advice rarely helps and usually makes us feel even more alienated than ever from those we love.

During this time of adjustment, it's important to take care of yourself physically. Work hard at eating a well-balanced diet and follow the exercise recommendations of your doctor. Taking care of our physical well-being has a profound impact on how we feel.

Try attending a loss support group. Our staff can recommend a group when you are ready, and many hospices, hospitals, faith communities, and senior centers offer these groups. Some are general grief groups for people regardless of their loss while others are specifically for folks who are widowed or whose child has died. In addition to groups for folks who are grieving the death of a loved person, there are also support groups for people who are dealing with disabilities or are caring for a chronically ill family member.

Finding What Is "Normal"

Make sure you give yourself time and space for healing, too. We expect this process to be resolved much quicker than is usually realistic, so give yourself permission to feel this way for a while. Even though you would like to "be over this" quickly, most losses take at least a year or two to fully reconcile. And remember that you don't really "recover" as much as you learn to live in a world that has been radically changed.

Now is also a great time to explore or reaffirm your faith, too. A member of the clergy or other spiritual leader can help you as you grapple with faith questions. Reading the Bible or spiritual devotional materials can help you as you work through the faith-related questions in your bereavement.

Make time to be with supportive people who offer compassion and a "listening ear"

Finally, be sure to make connections with your family, church or temple, and community groups of which you are a part. These people who "know you best" may be some of your most faithful supporters in your grief.

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