

Dealing with grief and loss

At community centers, retirement centers, nursing homes, and other extended care facilities, it is very likely that many older adults are grieving for more than one loss: a spouse, family members, friends, coworkers, family home; loss of a valued role in life, in family and in community and/or the workplace; health, age-related changes in physical appearance, disease, surgery. Other losses that are seldom recognized are loss of independence, income decline, and self-esteem. Also, it is easy to underestimate the impact of these losses on elders due to the commonly-held belief that aging in some way prepares a person to cope with loss.

Loss in our lives is a universal experience. Grief is the normal, *emotional* reaction to a loss. Some losses seem worse than others, the most difficult ones being those that change our lives forever. When that happens, the grief is painfully acute and we turn away from it. In our culture, pain is presented as something that can and should be avoided, instead of being seen as an inescapable part of being human. Friends, coworkers, and even family members expect people to “just get over it,” be strong, keep busy, and move on with life. Most people are uncomfortable around the sadness and tears of others and want a quick solution for their grief. But grief is not a disease or illness that can be cured. It’s the price people pay for love and total commitment to another.

MYTHS ABOUT GRIEF

The most frequently asked question about grief is, “How long does it last?” That there exists a timetable for when grief ends is a very common myth. There is no timetable for grief and there are no “shoulds.” The grief will always be there—you don’t “get over” it—but the pain will lessen and the waves of grief will come less frequently. The grieving process depends on many

variables including spiritual beliefs, life experiences, type of loss, relationship with the deceased, type of death (sudden, accident, suicide, prolonged illness), and individual coping styles. Grief is unpredictable: it comes in waves and leaves people feeling out of control.

Another myth is that there is an orderly step-by-step process to get through the stages of grief that Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross defined—shock and denial, anger and guilt, bargaining, depression, and adjustment and acceptance. However, there is no order to how or when each person will experience these stages, and not everyone

will experience them all. No two people grieve alike. Each person’s grief is unique.

Bereaved persons are like ducks:
Above the surface . . .
looking composed and unruffled.
Below the surface . . .
Paddling like crazy!

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STRATEGIES

Information and suggestions to help older adults with the grief process in general and during the holidays:

- Grief is an emotion and needs to be felt; it can’t be worked out in the head.
- Only the individual can decide what’s right for him or her during this time.
- It is extremely important to emphasize that people be kind to themselves and lower their expectations of what they can do. Grief takes up a lot of emotional and physical energy.
- Grief is a life-changing experience and it takes time and patience to adjust.
- Lack of concentration, difficulty sleeping, forgetfulness, confusion are normal.
- Tears are not a sign of weakness; they are an emotional first aid.
- It can be comforting to carry or wear something that belonged to their loved one.
- Having someone to listen to them is the most helpful to people. Listen without giving advice, without judgment; resist telling your own stories.

Resources in the Regional Resource Center for grief and loss

To improve access to educational resources with a geriatric/gerontological focus, NWGEC collects and loans materials through its Regional Resource Center. Reflecting our current emphasis on health promotion for older adults, resources relating to topics and issues in health promotion for older adults have been selectively added to our resource library. These materials are available to community-based providers to support the design, development, and implementation of health promotion programs for rural and ethnic elders, their family members and their caregivers.

**The S or V number following the reference should be used when requesting materials from our Regional Resource Center.*

BOOKS

Current Widowhood: Myths and Realities, Helena Znaniecka Lopata, Understanding Families, Sage Publications, 1996, 250 pgs. [S0762].

This volume provides an overview of the major themes that have characterized the study of widowhood in the recent decade. It includes definitions of the basic concepts surrounding widowhood (e.g. emotions, identity, roles, external relationships, and support systems) as well as a comparative and historical perspective on the situation of widows in various parts of the world. The author also explores the numerous myths and assumptions linked to the topic.

Living with Grief When Illness is Prolonged, Kenneth J. Doka (Editor.) Hospice Foundation of America, 1997, 220pgs [S0887]. [Accompanying video—V0415]

Written for those who deal with bereavement issues, this book focuses on loss and grief experienced by individuals with prolonged illness, their families and caregivers. Articles were compiled from the Hospice Foundation of America's *Living with Grief* series. A video, *Someone you love is dying. How do you cope?* accompanies the book.

The Last Dance: Encountering Death and Dying, Lynne Anne DeSpelder and Albert Lee Strickland, Mayfield Publishing Company, 1987, 562 pgs. [S0116].

This text focuses on death and dying and provides both theoretical foundations to grief and loss as well

as methods for applying what is learned about death and dying to real life situations. Chapter topics include: attitudes toward death, how children learn about death, health care systems, living with life-threatening illness, last rites, understanding the experience of loss, medical ethics, suicide, and beyond death/after life.

VIDEOS

Grief, Loss, and Older Adults, Mental Health Outreach Network, 20 minutes. [S0762].

This video is designed to help health care providers personalize the impact grief and loss has on older adults. It focuses on the value and impact of the loss of: personal possessions, career and life-long interests, physical and health changes, sensory deprivation and other sensory changes, and relationships with friends, family and pets. The video also includes information about the wisdom older adults develop in dealing with grief and loss, how to value and respect that wisdom, and how to listen while older adults deal with their losses.

Resource Center loan policy:

Books and videos on Health Promotion: The loan period is for two weeks free-of-charge. Loans are limited to 3 items per transaction. Materials may be picked up in person or forwarded via US mail. Please telephone NWGEC at (206) 685-7478 or fax at (206) 685-3436 to request materials.

The Regional Resource Center is located at NWGEC's office, 1910 Fairview Ave E., Suite #203, Seattle. You are invited to browse books, screen videotapes, or borrow resource materials. Please call NWGEC (206) 685-7478 for a browsing appointment or to arrange long distance loans.

Grief and loss (continued from page one)

- Remember that expressions of anger are not directed at you.
- Although grieving men experience the same feelings, *in general* they find it harder to talk about them. They feel better *doing* something, so encourage any activities that interest them. If a man does want to talk, listen without an agenda.
- Two keys to healing are acceptance and expression of feelings.

What not to say:

- “I know exactly how you feel.”
 - “It was for the best.”
 - “You can marry again/you’ll meet someone else.”
 - “Don’t dwell on it.”
- Clichés come across as empty-sounding and can hurt more than help.

A handout with further information on the grieving process is available from the NWGEC office. Please call Pat Bartnick, NWGEC Program Coordinator and experienced Certified Grief Facilitator, to request the handout or if you have any questions regarding grief issues with your clients at (206) 685.7478 or email at patann@u.washington.edu

Tips to help older adults through the holidays

Holidays are an especially difficult time and many wish that they could just skip over the time from Thanksgiving to January 2nd.

- **Plan ahead.** Sit down with family members and decide together what each of you can do comfortably.
- Anticipation and anxiety about holidays are worse than the actual day.
- **Set limits.** Realize that it isn’t going to be easy. Do the things that are very special and/or important to you. Do what you feel like doing, not what you or others expect you to do.
- Emotionally, physically and psychologically, this time is draining. Make it a priority to have some quiet, restful times. When your body is well taken care of, you can better face your emotions.
- One day at a time, one hour at a time, sometimes one breath at a time.
- If you decide to accept an invitation, let the hostess know that this is an emotional time for you and, you may either not be able to come when the day arrives, or you may need to leave early.
- *There is no right or wrong way.* You can follow family traditions, or change them to suit the new reality.

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Web resources on grief and loss

Web pages dedicated to grief and loss are increasing in both quantity and quality. Sites offer information on the grief process and provide opportunities to share feelings, questions, and concerns with others. Below is a small sampling of some of these sites. Unfortunately, not all list an address or phone number.

- <http://www.rivendell.org> Griefnet: emergency information and resources; online support/discussion groups, newsletter.
- www.opn.com/willowgreen Willowgreen: grief and loss counseling: “creates, markets and distributes books, videotapes, audiotapes in areas of loss/grief, illness/dying, caregiving, managing transition, older age, and spirituality.” 10351 Dawson’s Creek Blvd, Suite B, Fort Wayne, IN 46802. phone (219) 490-2222; fax: (219) 497-9622, email: jmiller@willowgreencom.
- www.nho.org National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization: how to find a hospice. 1700 Diagonal Road, Suite 300, Alexandria, VA 22314. phone (703) 837-1500; email info@nhpco.org.
- www.griefshare.com Griefshare Grief Recovery Support Groups: Resources, bookstore, links.
- www.griefworks.com “The most comprehensive source for grief and loss”; general grief, kids, parents, cancer, illness.
- www.caregivertips.com “Living with Grief when a Loved One is Dying.”
- www.petloss.com Helpful links.

A new look for *Viewpoint*

For many of us, there seems to be less time to do even more tasks. NWGEC wants *Viewpoint* to be a *helpful* tool for disseminating information to busy people. In order to accomplish this, we have made some changes to our newsletter based on suggestions from *Viewpoint* readers.

ONLINE—*Viewpoint* will now be online! You can access *Viewpoint* at NWGEC's web site: <http://depts.washington.edu/nwgec>. We will continue to "publish" *Viewpoint* twice a year. If you would like to receive an email notice when a new issue is available with a link to our web site, please send a copy of your email address to patann@u.washington.edu. If you do not have access to the Internet or would like to receive a printed copy of *Viewpoint* in the mail, please contact NWGEC at (206) 685-7478.

TOPIC SPECIFIC—To disseminate the latest health promotion information relevant to health care providers, future issues of *Viewpoint* will be topic specific. With the holiday season approaching, NWGEC has selected grief and loss for our first theme. In each issue, we will provide a key article, a list of resources available at the NWGEC Regional Resource Library and other helpful sources of information. We will continue to include all other relevant NWGEC news.

To get an online notice of new issues of *Viewpoint*,
SEND YOUR EMAIL ADDRESS TO NWGEC
at patann@u.washington.edu or call at (206) 685-7478.

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