



Older adults: when grief won't heal

Grieving is the natural and inevitable human response to loss. After a significant loss we may feel like life has less meaning or we may struggle to find purpose in our existence. Bereavement is a common experience for older adults, as we age we are more likely to encounter:

- » Multiple losses such as death of a partner, friends and companion animals.
- » Secondary losses such as the loss of intimacy or financial loss and
- » Non death related losses such as retirement or loss of independence.

Older adults are more likely to experience 'grief that doesn't change or heal' over time. Dr Katherine Shear suggests that older adults are vulnerable to developing complications that 'derail' the normal grieving process. This is of particular concern if six to twelve months have passed since the death and people still feel 'stuck' in their grief.

Most people will adapt to loss and significant life changes over time; however, a small number of individuals will go on to develop grief symptoms that persist, remain severe or impact on daily functioning. For some grief can continue to feel as intense and overwhelming as it did when the loss first occurred, they may say things like:

**'I feel so stuck'
'I cannot accept that this had happened' or
'I have no purpose in life'**

Some signs that an older adult is not adapting to their loss include:

- » Feeling Intense sorrow, pain or having ruminating thoughts.
- » Focusing on little else but the person who has died or the significant loss.
- » Excessive avoidance of reminders.
- » Intense and persistent longing, yearning or pining.
- » Problems accepting the reality of the loss over time.
- » Numbness or detachment.
- » Feelings of bitterness.
- » Feeling like life holds no meaning or purpose.
- » A lack of trust in others.
- » An inability to enjoy life or remember positive experiences.

What to do?

If you or others have concerns that an older adult may be experiencing 'grief that isn't changing or healing' it is essential that they seek support from a qualified Mental Health Professional who has an awareness of how to recognise and assess for Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD) and experience and training in treating it.

Some suitable practitioners* may include:

- » Specialist Bereavement Counsellors
- » Mental Health Social Workers
- » Clinical Psychologists
- » Psychiatrists
- » Geriatricians

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***It is important to note that not all Mental Health Professionals have specific knowledge about grief and/or Prolonged Grief Disorder. Please contact the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement for a list of Certified Bereavement Practitioners or for more information in regard to PGD.**

How can I support myself?

- » Plan some pleasurable activities.
- » Ask for help from family and friends (others may not know unless you tell them how you feel).
- » If you live in an Aged Care Facility, find a staff member who you trust to talk to if you think it would help.
- » Look for 'glimmers' of joy or notice times when things go well.
- » Notice what feels comforting such as crying, physical touch or talking to a compassionate person.

How can I support an older adult?

- » Talk about the person who has died or the losses that have occurred.
- » Listen to the person who is struggling with their grief without offering advice or saying things like 'he had a good innings'.
- » Ask the person what they think would help them such as going to a café or library, having a haircut or getting a good night's sleep.
- » Remember significant dates and 'check in' with the older person.
- » Advocate for the older adult if needed to help them get the right support.

Some strategies which may be used by a health care professional include:

- » Helping the person identify and manage particularly difficult times such as anniversaries.
- » Considering cultural practices and when grieving is outside of cultural norms.
- » Using a diary to recognise and monitor when grief is particularly intense or feels more manageable.
- » Recognising 'triggers' or times when grief feels overwhelming or heightened.
- » Using strategies to reduce the avoidance of 'triggers'.
- » Using strategies to help with planning 'time off' or 'taking a break' from grieving.
- » Listening and helping people find meaning and purpose in their lives.
- » Assisting the bereaved to find a lasting connection to the deceased person.
- » Assessing a person's social network and supports.

Download the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement's My Grief App for immediate information about how to receive bereavement support or how to support someone who is grieving.

Contact the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement Aged Care support service on 1800 22 22 00 to arrange to speak with a Specialist Bereavement Counsellor about telephone or online bereavement counselling.