

Assisting an Older Adult in Coping with a Loss

Objective

To identify ways to help older adults cope with loss.

What to Know

While grief and loss are an inevitable reality for most people, older people have unique and often worse effects from loss. Society often ignores the multiple and dynamic losses of older people. They frequently face the loss of ability, health, home (if they move into an assisted living facility), personal possessions, pets, driver's licenses, and sense of life purpose. This accumulation of loss is profound and can lead to bereavement overload – making it difficult to accept and process one loss before another one occurs.

Older people are at a much higher risk for severe health complications because of increased stress related to loss – combined with any current health conditions. Be aware of the following signs the older person is struggling:

- **appetite changes** can be a concern, as many older adults already experience reduced appetite as they age
- **confusion** can be more intense and include forgetfulness, disorientation, and disorganization
- **increased financial pressure** can occur with the loss of a spouse or driver's license (if they depended on it for employment)
- **isolation and loneliness** may drastically increase – sometimes resulting in premature death

Older people will lose many of their loved ones – parents, siblings, spouses, friends, and sometimes children. They also experience a high degree of anticipatory grief, as their loved ones may receive health diagnoses like dementia. It is also likely they will eventually lose their independence.

As a first line of support, you can help the older adults in your life as they experience loss. Here are some suggestions.

- 1. Spend time together.** This helps the person feel less lonely and decreases the negative effects of social isolation.
- 2. Communicate about the loss.** Allow the person to process their grief by sharing memories and emotions. Talk about memories of your own, and express curiosity by asking questions.
- 3. Help with daily tasks.** Cook a meal, pick up medications, assist with paperwork, or take them to a doctor's appointment. The person may not know what to ask for when others say, "Please let me know if there is anything I can do."

4. Explore long-term assistance. Keep in touch and continue helping with those things you are comfortable helping with. Identify community resources that might be helpful (e.g., a meal delivery service or local transportation services).

5. Understand the grieving process. Although there are common physical and emotional symptoms of grief, everyone processes loss differently. Allow the person to grieve in their own way. If you are unsure what to say, simply listen.

If the person is grieving the loss of a loved one, there might be many practical tasks to attend to over the short- and long-term, including:

- planning a funeral or memorial
- writing an obituary
- obtaining a death certificate
- dealing with their loved one's possessions (including pets)
- attending to legal matters such as autopsies or wills
- managing financial matters like paying medical bills, or seeing to ongoing bills if the person they lost normally took care of them
- learning new skills to manage household tasks
- loss of income
- gaining access to financial accounts, credit cards, and so on
- closing/managing a digital legacy of email, online accounts, social media, etc.
- experiencing conflict around any of these issues with others
- moving or downsizing their home

Any of these issues could be overwhelming for the older adult to manage. Assist the older adult in:

- making a list and a plan to help them feel more control and experience less strain
- prioritize the list
 - if completing the task makes them feel better, prioritize it
 - if there is official pressure, such as legal or financial matters, reflect on how urgent it really is and slot it into the priority list accordingly
- break the plan down into manageable steps
- delegate some tasks to others who are willing to help

What to Do

Make a list of ways you can help the older adult in your life cope with loss.

Choose two or three problems that feel particularly overwhelming for the person. For each, complete the table below. On the left side, break each one into as many steps as you can. On the right side, make notes as to when the task should happen, who may be involved, what they will need to complete the step, and so on. Be as detailed as possible. Use additional paper if you need more space.

Challenge #1: _____

Steps	When, how, who, what...

Challenge #2: _____

Steps	When, how, who, what...

Challenge #3: _____

Steps	When, how, who, what...

Did breaking the problems into smaller steps help? Why or why not?

What else can you do to assist? Be specific.

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____
 (1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
