

Life Changes and Grieving

Although it may not seem fair, the fact is that many of life's significant losses occur when a person reaches old age. For example, elderly people who leave their homes and belongings to move into a long-term care home often feel a strong sense of dislocation and loss.

Then there's the loss of status that comes simply from growing old in a society that sometimes undervalues its elderly.

Loss of status and self-esteem may also occur when people give up their careers, or can no longer contribute to their community through volunteer work and other activities. Many people's sense of self is tied to their occupation.

And of course loss of health is devastating. Such setbacks as visual and hearing loss, difficulty with walking, and dementia prevent people from exercising independence and control. Indeed, many residents of long-term care homes suffer from one or more major health concerns.

And if all this isn't enough, elderly people must often deal with the loss of friends, family and spouses – people with whom they've shared a lifetime together.

Old age can be a difficult time of life. And it can be difficult for families who must stand by and watch, too. How does one help a grieving family member? We offer you two pieces of wisdom.

First, there are some things about grief that many people don't realize. One is that the grieving process lasts much longer than people think – one or two years, or even longer. Another is that people must be with their grief, must live with it, embrace it, and mourn in their own way in their own time. To interfere with this process is to stand in the way of complete healing.

The second piece of wisdom is to remember that, as a friend or family member, you should not assume responsibility for your loved one's grief. You can't reverse what has happened, as much as you may wish you could. You can't restore a person's ability to hear music or read books. You can't change time, or bring back a loved one who has died.

Instead, your role is comparatively simple. It is to listen, ask questions, offer comfort, and wait. It is also to overlook seemingly irrational expressions of grief such as anger or bitterness.

This means encouraging your loved one to express feelings and inner conflict, and taking what you hear seriously. It means saying such things as "Dad, I'm so sorry you're feeling unhappy." Or, "Mom, tell me what you miss most about your sister."

It means resisting the urge to tell your own story, or to say such things as 'I know how you must feel,' or "It's all for the best," or "You'll feel better before you know it."

It means encouraging the person you love to perform small tasks, such as watering a plant or returning a book to someone down the hall. It means bringing joy and pleasure through your visits, and the way you choose to spend your time together.

It means lots of understanding, lots of listening, lots of companionable silence, and a tremendous amount of patience.

If you ever feel the need to talk, come in and speak to your administrator, director of care or social worker. Our doors are always open to you.