

Helping Seniors Cope with the Loss of a Loved One

During this time of their lives, a lot of your senior's experience may be punctuated by loss: loss of health, independence, mobility, routine, and more. The most acute loss is that of family and friends. Here are some ways to help them cope.

As they grow older, your loved ones will lose friends, family and spouses through death. While they may be aware that loss will happen, that knowledge doesn't always give them the tools to handle it.

The Stages of Grief

Swiss-American psychiatrist Elizabeth Kübler-Ross outlines five stages in the grief process:

Denial	Anger	Bargaining	Depression	Acceptance
"This can't be happening to me."	"Why is this happening? Who is to blame?"	"Make this not happen, and in return I will ____."	"I'm too sad to do anything."	"I'm at peace with what happened."
1	2	3	4	5

While it is often thought that, once you've completed one stage, you move to the next one and never go back, this is not necessarily the case. The path is more like a roller coaster where the person grieving may experience higher and lower depths of feeling and may loop back to previous steps multiple times during the ride. This is normal.

Often, memory loss and dementia can make it feel like the losses are fresh over and over. It is important to practice compassion when your senior doesn't remember that their spouse or friend has passed. Allow them to process it anew, rather than being frustrated with them that they don't remember. They may have to go through the stages of grief daily.

Losing a spouse may leave a gap that is larger than just the person. The lost spouse may have been the one who was more upbeat, more thoughtful, more organized, more of the caregiver in the relationship. There may have been tasks they enacted throughout the relationship that the surviving spouse never had to do – paying bills, cooking, gardening, cleaning, even driving. This secondary loss can be keenly felt by the surviving spouse. Learning new skills at this point in their lives may seem overwhelming and contribute to the difficulty of moving on at each stage.

Don't discount the loss of other friends or family in their life. Staying involved in their daily lives, even through phone conversations, will help you see who is important to your loved one and will help you know when to be there for them during an unexpected loss.

Source: [HelpGuide](#)



The Difference Between Grief & Depression

Grief and depression have many common symptoms, but there are ways to tell the difference. Grief comes with ups and downs and involves a variety of emotions. Even when people are grieving, they will experience times of joy and happiness. With depression, however, the feelings of despair are persistent.

Symptoms that may indicate depression rather than just grief include:

- Persistent and vague complaints
- Moving in a slower manner
- Demanding behavior
- Trouble concentrating
- Pessimism
- Loss of interest in things once pleasurable

If you see signs of depression in anyone or experience these symptoms yourself, seek help from a medical or mental health professional.

Source: [HelpGuide](#)

Healthy Ways to Help Your Senior Handle Grief



Share the Sorrow

Allow your senior to talk about their loss if they want to. They might feel comforted to know that you are grieving as well. If it seems appropriate, suggesting a loss support group can be very helpful, as they might feel safer sharing with strangers.



Don't Ignore the Pain

It may feel like you can push the pain away by immersing your loved ones in other activities. Unfortunately, this only delays the pain and sometimes forces it to surface in inappropriate or unhealthy ways.



Allow them to Express Grief in their Own Way

Everyone expresses grief in different ways: tears, screaming, withdrawing, cleaning, caregiving, sleeping. Allow your loved one to grieve in their own way.



Offer Practical Help

Especially if the deceased spouse was traditionally the caregiver or the one to manage the household, the surviving spouse may be overwhelmed and stop caring for themselves. Offer to cook, clean, run errands, and take them to appointments.



Source: [Mental Health America](#)

It is unavoidable that your senior will experience loss in their lives. How they process and handle that loss can be shaped by the love and caring of their caretakers, family, and friends.

Depression in Seniors

Grief left unacknowledged can morph into depression. Depression is a medical illness that carries with it a wealth of other health risks. Unfortunately, so often, depression is assumed as a normal component of aging – a reaction to illness, loss, and social transition as your senior faces their own mortality and vulnerability. It does not need to be.

Depression is often mistaken for or lumped in with the symptoms of:

- dementia
- Alzheimer's disease
- arthritis
- cancer
- heart disease
- Parkinson's disease
- stroke
- thyroid disorders

While depression certainly might stem from these conditions, it needs to be treated as a separate illness with its own diagnosis. Sometimes, successfully addressing depression can lessen other symptoms of aging. Happiness or contentment can be a healing antidote, protecting the immune system, increasing social awareness, lowering heart and blood pressure, and inspiring healthier decisions.

Source: [Healthline](#), [NCOA](#)

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