

# Grieving the Loss of a Partner as an Older Adult

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# What is grief?

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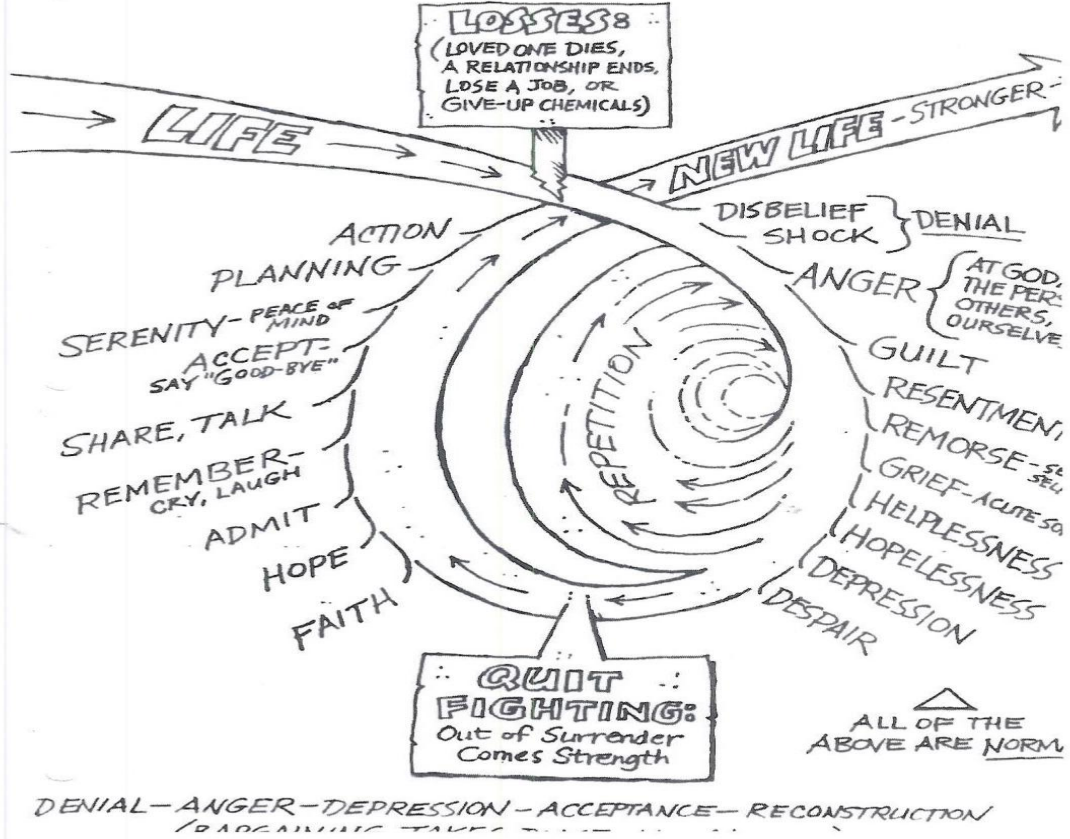
Grief is a person's response of sad emotions from the loss of a loved one.

Grief is a natural and universal reaction to a loss.



# The Loss Cycle

The Normal Cycle for All Losses...



# What does grief look like?

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Grief is experienced differently for each person and can alter frequently. A person might describe their feelings of numbness and distant from their daily routine.

Feeling the emotional and physical pain of a loss can be experienced and expressed differently, such as “feeling removed from life” when talking about how regular routines are hard to continue.

Some partners might also express feeling fearful for the future once their partner dies. Fears might consider factors of physical, mental, emotional, or financial well-being.

# Experiencing Grief

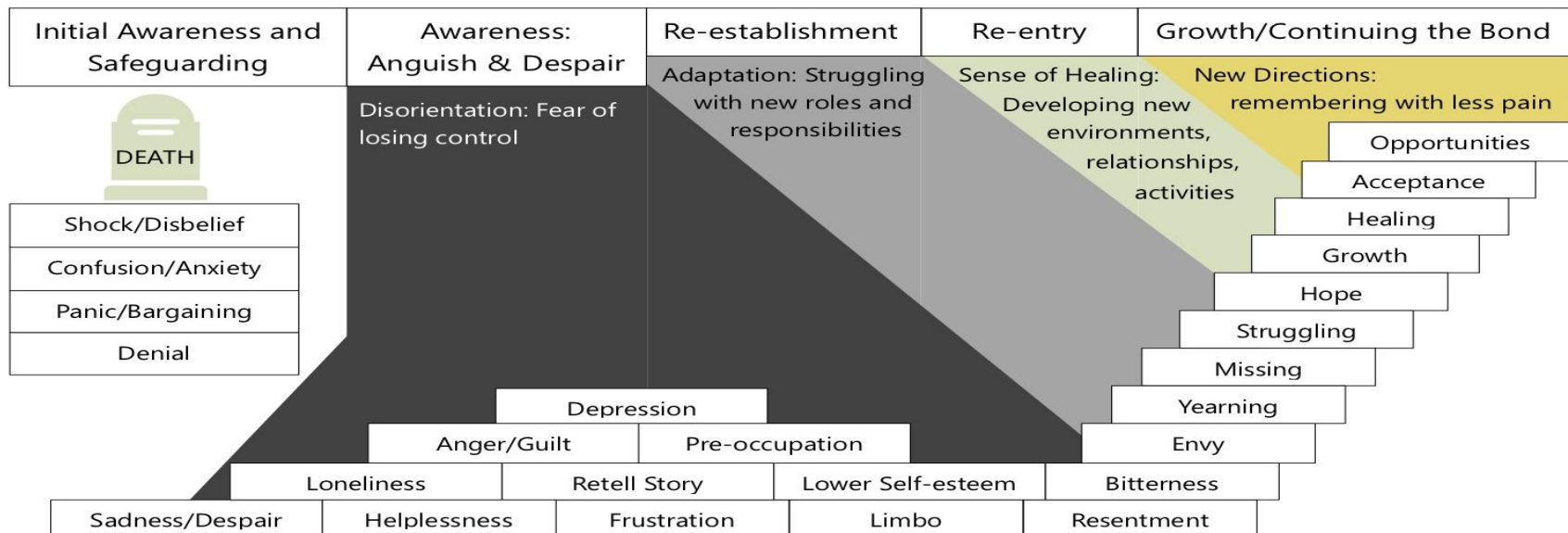
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Losing a partner is hard, especially once the couple has become dependent on one another.

Grieving from the loss can become harder when considering the person's end-of-life events. Whether the person died suddenly or after battling a long-term illness can impact the partner's grieving process.

While you wouldn't rush your partner's death, some have mentioned the agony of watching their loved one slowly decline from a health condition until death and the experienced feeling of "peace" rather than grief once they have passed.

# The Experience of Grief



Adapted from: Jack P. LoCicero, Ph.D., 1991



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# Reducing Risks

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If a couple has prepared for death physically, practically, and financially, this can help to reduce the stress while the surviving partner is grieving.

Examples:

- have access to bank accounts and ability to manage bills and finances
- be familiar with your partner's desires after death (burial or cremation, where to be buried or spread ashes, designate who inherits the belongings)

Many elderly couples don't have the financial stability or resources to prepare for funeral expenses, medical bills, or settling estates with a lawyer.

(Lancaster & Johnson, 2020) found that women are more likely to experience a financial strain from the loss of their partner compared to men. This extends from gender inequalities and traditional lifestyles of older traditions, such as women working in the home while men were breadwinners in the family.

# What's “normal” with grief?

## Physically:

- Lack of sleep
- Lack of energy
- Loss of appetite
- Overeating
- Loss of focus on tasks

## Emotionally:

- Experiencing some days grieving more than others
- Feeling overwhelmed and stressed
- Feeling distant from others
- Struggling with emotional regulation
- Loss of desire to socialize with others





# How does it affect a partner, especially who's older?

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After being together for several years, older adult couples tend to build dependency on one another to survive. This creates a challenging adjustment and sometimes is a learning curve to do specific tasks once a partner dies.



## Managing Roles:

Learning to fulfill the tasks of the bereaved partner might include making meals, grocery shopping, paying bills, scheduling appointments, driving, laundry, yardwork, fixing the car, routine house maintenance, and other daily tasks.



## Socialization:

If the bereaved partner was the outgoing social butterfly of the couple, the surviving partner might lose interest and influence to participate in social events.

Increase in lack of companionship and loneliness can result in depression and emotional health risks.

## Caretaker:

If the bereaved partner was the primary caretaker of the family, there will be a change in family functioning and dynamic.

Often, the adult's child(ren) take responsibility and help the widowed parent.

## Health:

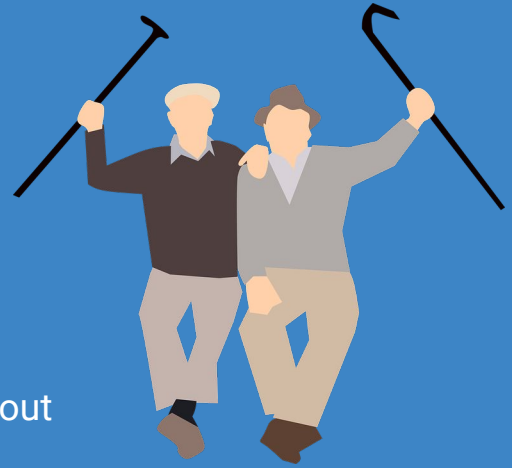
The surviving partner might also experience a decline in health because of the gap of care from dependency on their partner.

Wellness checks become a priority for the surviving partner, who is adjusting to living alone.

# What helps?

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- Do not seclude yourself (be active, participate in social groups, see family/friends)
- Identify the reason for suffering (talk through your emotions and memories about the death of the person)
- Talk with others (share your feelings, concerns, and thoughts about the process)
- Identify your needs (voice your needs of support to recover)
- Join support groups (participate in discussions with others who have experienced similar losses)
- Identify personal strengths to endure and overcome grief



# Activity Ideas to Promote Resilient Recovery

- Go for a walk around your neighborhood, a local park, or nearby mall
- Go to the local library, maybe join a book club
- Explore hobbies, maybe try learning to play an instrument by joining a music class
- Try an exercise class suited for your age population
- Foster or adopt a pet from an animal shelter
- Join a class or group at a local senior center or recreation center
- Volunteer at a local organization, hospital, or school
- Call or write letters to friends/family members



# Counseling Relief

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## Grief Counselor:

Talking with a grief counselor can be therapeutic to help navigate the process of accepting death and recovering from the loss of a partner

## Support Groups:

Participating in discussions with a group of people who are also grieving from a bereavement can be beneficial to promote coping and help manage recovery.



# What are some challenges while grieving?

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- Emotional pain lingers, but usually improves as time passes. Often times, older adults struggle to voice their emotions and feelings as this defies their generational teachings.
- Adapting to a new or altered lifestyle is hard, especially for an older adult who has been with their partner for majority of their lifetime.
- Many older adults mention feeling “lost” without their bereaved partner because of the sudden lack of companionship, care, and dependency to share with someone.
- Accessing support and resources can become a challenge at an elder age due to physical and/or technology limitations.
- Many big decisions have to be made while/after someone has died. It’s helpful to make gradual changes compared to several sudden big changes, such as selling estates, the house, leaving a job, or moving to a new location.

# Secondary Losses to Consider

Secondary losses occur when there has been a primary loss, such as from a loved one. It is called secondary because it stems from the primary loss, but can still be significant.

Examples include loss of:

- Chosen lifestyle or routine
- Self awareness
- Feeling of security or safety
- Homeland
- Financial security
- Trust
- Culture
- Health
- Happiness and peace



# How can I recover from grief?

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When mourning a loss, everyone copes differently, but similarly.

It's important to take care of yourself during this life change, such as continuing to eat healthy, sleep, and exercise often.

However, once mourning continues for an extended time and the sadness does not seem to be improving, this may be a sign of depression. If depression develops and prevents day-to-day life, you should seek a doctor to help manage.



# Similar Stories

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## Charlie and Doug's story

Shortly after Charlie's husband Doug died, his friends started coming over with dinners and memories to share. They would sit around Charlie's dining table for hours remembering Doug's humor and kindness. Soon, Doug's friends were joining them with their own recollections. It was so much like old times that it almost seemed Doug had just stepped out of the room. Those evenings together helped Charlie, as well as the others, start to heal after their loss.



# Healing Practice - Where to start

- Determine how you might be grieving. What does it look like for you?
- Identify your support system. How can each person help?
- Determine the changes from the loss of a partner. What can you control?
- Identify your secondary losses. How can you cope with those losses?
- Decide daily activities to take care of yourself daily while grieving.
- Identify your strengths and how those can be used to help cope.

Remember grieving is a process. It's important to cope and grieve at your own pace, but to get help when needed.

**IT'S OKAY TO  
ASK FOR HELP**



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