

# The love that remains- Bereavement and Grief in Elderly

*by Ravichandra Karkal*

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## **“The love that remains”- Bereavement and Grief in Elderly**

- Dr Ravichandra Karkal

“Do not think of me as gone - I am with you still- in each new dawn”.  
-from the Irish poem “Forget-Me-Not”, Author unknown

*“A sense of heaviness has taken over me. My heart hurts and there is a darkness which has shrouded my being. I keep looking for him everywhere. Every little thing reminds me of him. A painful longing to be with him.”*, said a woman in her 60s who lost her husband few days back. Her children got her for counselling as they got worried about her well-being.

Bereavement - the loss of a life partner or other loved ones is an inevitable life event in elderly and grief is a natural response to this. Just as a wound is intensely painful, then becomes bearable and heals gradually; so does the pain of losing someone. The majority would naturally adapt to the loss, garner resources for healing and move forward in life. But this journey is not always simple or linear. The whole process can be messy at times and not fit into the predictable framework as was propounded earlier by researchers- the stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Grief can take myriad forms and an understanding of its manifestations is an important step towards healthy coping.

*“The sadness is paralysing. All I can think right now is why she had to leave. It seems unfair. I just cannot believe that she is not there anymore. I keep asking myself what is the point of continuing. Life has come to a standstill.”*, said an elderly man who lost his seemingly healthy wife due to a sudden heart attack. This surge of grief right after one comes to know about the passing away is filled with painful emotions- sadness, anger, fear, and anxiety. It is also likely if the loss was sudden and unexpected.

Grief can also gradually creep without one’s notice even before the actual death of the spouse when they have been suffering from a terminal illness or progressively irreversible illness like dementia. *“Each day for the last five years I have been losing him gradually. It has come to a point where the person I knew is not there anymore. He physically looks familiar but a stranger life inside him.”*, said a lady about her 70-year-old husband living with Alzheimer’s disease - an illness characterised by loss of memory, thinking abilities, intellect and

personality. An inevitable loss may also provoke grief long before one's partner has parted away.

As the individual mourns the loss through rituals and ceremonies unique to every religion, culture, and region- the intensely painful emotions fade away over months and years. They can however make a comeback especially on the anniversary or other days which are a strong reminder of the person. As time passes by, the sharp emotions are replaced by the bitter-sweet longing for the beloved, an emotion beautifully captured by the Portuguese term "Saudade"- a state of nostalgia, melancholy and yearning for someone who might never be had again. The individual accepts the reality, focuses on their well-being, and grows spiritually.

Sadly, for a few elderly grieving is not a smooth process and they feel stuck in it for months or even years. The sorrow remains intense and dominates the day-to-day life. The individual does not come to terms with the reality and personal life and well-being is side-lined. Guilt, denial, anger, blame, emotional numbness, avoidance of reminders of the loved one, inability to experience joy and isolation from one's social circle can be seen. This is known as complicated grief and when it goes unchecked it can lead to significant mental health and physical health costs. According to one estimate, nearly 10% of those bereaved by natural causes experience a prolonged grief disorder. Medical attention becomes inevitable in such scenarios to restore the individual's capacity to live a fulfilling life.

#### **How to know that you or a bereaved loved one is healing?**

The individual accepts reality and opens about their emotional pain. They seek company of others and connect with their community to mourn. They respect their own needs and pursue their personal interests and goals in life. Although there may be ups and downs in the healing process, with grief coming in waves on some days, these individuals have a smooth resolution of their grief.

#### **Red flags which may foretell unresolved grief:**

The bereaved carries anger and bitterness about their loss. They keep imagining scenarios where their partner was alive. They keep wishing that they could change the events which led to the demise or doubt whether they did enough to save their partner. Feeling guilty to have survived and wishing they were dead instead. Although these signs can be commonly seen in every bereaved individual especially in the immediate aftermath of the event, they tend to go away in a short time.

**Grieving during the corona virus pandemic:**

The whole world is grieving during the pandemic with everyone having lost at least one friend or family to the virus. The elderly community has taken the brunt of the brutalities of the virus. The last days of our beloved have become lonelier than ever with many saying their last goodbyes over a video call. Not being with the dying can be extremely distressing for the bereaved. The traditional rituals and mourning which form an essential part of the grieving process are also disrupted. The pandemic, travelling restrictions and limits/ban on gatherings have meant that the grieving has become an isolated affair. The support from the family and the community during the ceremonies such as cremation/funeral is not possible in the traditional way. Although online video conferencing has been the only choice to commemorate the lost individual, it can not fully replace the physical interaction of a traditional ritual.

**Helping a grieving elder:**

Our instinct makes us want to take the suffering away when we have a bereaved elder in our circle. But when you are trying to help a grieving person, you must share space and be with them in their sorrow. Being present with them and showing a willingness to spend time will tell that you care. A lot of comfort is provided through non-verbal gestures and body language. Helping is not always about giving advice but listening attentively and make them feel understood. Elderly may also grieve the loss of a beloved pet and others need to be sensitive about this. Elders not familiar with technology can be trained to receive support from online forums and social networking sites.

**Grief Counselling:**

It is a specialized form of talk therapy which is undertaken by mental health professionals such as grief counsellors/therapists, psychologists, social workers, and psychiatrists. It involves empathetic listening, support and building coping skills to build resilience. The therapist may focus on “unfinished business” or unresolved conflicts using role-play or empty chair technique where the bereaved expresses his thoughts and feelings to the deceased. Art, music, and dance in various forms, can be used. Pets as companions for bereaved elderly can be a good idea.

**Medical treatment:**

There are set of elderly individuals who develop frank psychological symptoms and distress which amounts to psychiatric disorders such

as anxiety disorders and depression. In addition, individuals who were previously diagnosed with any psychiatric disorder are especially at risk for exacerbation of distressing psychological symptoms. Treatment with medications for a short duration along with talk therapy may be tried in these situations.

Bereavement and grief handled in a healthy manner may ensure that our elderly integrate the loss of their loved ones with acceptance and grow as an individual. Compassion, being present during the tough times and emotional support from the family and social circle of the elderly goes a long way in the journey of health ageing.

**Key Messages:**

1. Grief is a universal and natural response in the face of loss.
2. Mourning helps process grief, but it takes a unique course in everyone.
3. Accepting reality and working on one's well-being are crucial for healthy aging.
4. Grief counselling must be offered to elderly who are struggling to cope.
5. Technology can be a great support during the unprecedented times of the pandemic.

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