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8 Ways Grief Impacts Senior Health

Losing a spouse is a traumatic moment in the lives of seniors, and the resulting grief can impact health in ways beyond emotional pain. Here are eight ways that grief affects senior health, and what you can do to help.

1. Trouble Sleeping

Seniors who have recently lost a spouse may experience insomnia due to the stress and anxiety of their grief. Even without the emotional stresses, the loss of a life partner brings disruptions to seniors' sleep schedules that could make it difficult to get a good night's rest.

2. Loss of Appetite

Widowed seniors often experience a loss of appetite and decreased enjoyment in food. This can lead to significant weight loss, which is a problem for seniors at risk of becoming underweight. Being underweight increases the risk of [dementia](#) in elderly individuals.

3. Impaired Immune System

Seniors who are mourning a loss have weaker immune system than non-mourning adults of the same age, according to one [study](#). Due to the effects of the stress hormone cortisol, heightened stress in times of grief reduces an elderly person's white blood cell count, hindering their body's ability to fight off infection.

4. Chronic Stress

Increased stress is a natural response to a traumatic event, but for some seniors, the stress doesn't fade. Chronic stress can cause a cascade of health effects: Decreased immune response, reduced concentration and memory function, poorer recovery from injury and illness, and increased blood pressure are all [side effects](#) of long-term stress.

5. Depression

It's normal to grieve after the death of a partner, but sometimes that grief doesn't fade with time. This is known as complicated grief. Complicated grief is marked by depression, withdrawal, difficulty meeting the demands of everyday life, and even thoughts that life is no longer worth living.

6. Aches and Pains

Everyone knows that death causes emotional pain, but losing a loved one can lead to physical pain as well. After a loss, some people [may experience](#) chest pain, back pain, and achy joints, especially if their grief is prolonged.

7. Heart Attack and Stroke

Losing a spouse doubles the risk of a heart attack or stroke for senior citizens, according to [a study](#) in *JAMA Internal Medicine*. While doctors aren't sure why grief increases cardiovascular risk, they think it might be due to the spike in stress that follows a major loss. Thankfully, this heightened risk only lasts for the first one to three months after a spouse's death.

8. Shorter Lifespan

All of these health effects culminate in a troubling reality: Losing a spouse can shorten the lives of senior citizens. Some elderly people may pass away soon after their partner in a phenomenon called the "widowhood effect." Others may experience grief-induced declines in quality of life that impair health and shorten their remaining years. Seniors who are unable to cope with their loss could even take their own life.

The impact of grief on senior health is as real as it is frightening. So what can family and friends do to help?

Like anyone, seniors need extra support in the days and weeks following a loss. But unlike other bereaved people, the elderly need more support for longer.

Loved ones should sit down with bereaved seniors to determine what aspects of life were managed by the deceased spouse. If a now-gone wife has always handled the housework, hire someone who can take on on these duties in her absence. Managing the basics of life is important for ensuring a senior's quality of life moving forward.

Seniors still living in their family home should consider a move now that they're on their own. Selling a home and transitioning to a senior living community gives aging adults access to the support they need and provides access to new friendships. For seniors who are wary of retirement homes, an apartment complex can be a step up from more isolated single-family living.

Most importantly, loved ones should make an effort to be present in the lives of their senior family members. Losing a spouse can lead to devastating loneliness, and social support is key to helping seniors move forward healthfully and happily.

Resources:

<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-weight-dementia-risk-idUSKBN0NL2FC20150430>

<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/09/understanding-how-grief-weakens-the-body/380006/>

<https://www.stress.org/seniors/>

<http://www.everydayhealth.com/columns/therese-borchard-sanity-break/physical-signs-you-may-be-depressed/>

<http://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamainternalmedicine/fullarticle/1832196>

<https://www.redfin.com/city/15629/CA/Richmond>