



When Grief Becomes Depression: Helping Senior Loved One After Loss of Spouse

Feelings of despondency, numbness, and anxiety are a normal part of the grieving process, seniors included, and they can last anywhere from several weeks to several years. However, when grief fails to fade over time and your senior loved one is struggling to carry on with everyday life, it's possible that the grief has evolved into clinical depression.

Grief-Related Depression

According to the [American Cancer Society](#), about 20 percent of people experiencing grief will develop clinical depression. The depression may be brought on by the grief itself due to the traumatic nature of loss, or the stressful experience may escalate existing depressive symptoms into clinical depression. People with a history of depression, no support network, or a history of drug and alcohol abuse may be more likely to develop depression after a loss.

While depression and grief share many of the same symptoms, if your loved one is experiencing the following after a loss, it may be clinical depression:

- Thoughts of death or [suicide](#).
- An inability to complete everyday activities like cooking and cleaning.
- Disruptions to normal sleep patterns.
- Extreme weight loss or weight gain.
- Intrusive thoughts of hopelessness, worthlessness, or intense guilt.
- Persistent hallucinations and/or delusions.

These symptoms are relatively normal in the first weeks after a loss. In fact, about [40 percent of people](#) who lose a loved one will experience a major depressive episode in the first month following the death, and 24 percent will continue to experience depression through the second month. However, most bereaved persons are able to return to a normal level of functioning by four months after a loss, despite ongoing feelings of grief and sadness. When major disruptions to life persist beyond four months, professional help should be sought.

Treatment

When a person is experiencing depression, they may be prescribed antidepressants. While the antidepressants won't have any effect on the underlying grief, they can help a person gain control of day-to-day life. The renewed sense of normalcy may facilitate a healthier grieving process. As a tip, if your senior loved one already struggles to remember to take medication, put a reminder on their fridge or bathroom mirror with the correct dosage. A medicine holder labeled with the days is a great way to ensure they don't take more than prescribed each day.

Grief counseling may be combined with psychiatric treatment to help a depressed person work through grief. Grief counseling is a form of therapy that focuses on processing and accepting loss and developing healthy coping mechanisms. Your loved one may also benefit from a grief support group with other seniors. Whether your relationship to the deceased loved one was child, sibling, cousin, or friend, the grief you are experiencing is far different from that of losing a spouse. It can be helpful for your loved one to bond with others who can truly relate to what they are going through.

How You Can Help

After the loss of a spouse, your loved one may be unsure what to do. They likely spent a majority of their time together whether it was watching the morning news together over a cup of coffee or sitting in silence doing a crossword. That space next to them is now empty, but you can help them find [ways to adjust](#). For example, you might suggest that they turn on the TV or radio during meals to combat the feeling of loneliness, or make it a goal to have a meal out at a senior center or with friends at least once a week. Activities such as a bowling league, sewing group, bingo, and card games are a great way for them to get out of the house and socialize with others in their age group.

However, when they return home, the feelings of grief and depression may return, especially if they are returning to a home that is untidy or disorganized. As we age, it gets harder to move around and simple tasks becoming tiring. Your loved one may benefit from hiring a housekeeper to keep the home in order so that your senior loved one has a clean, stress-free abode. You can maximize the stress-free environment by offering to help them keep up with bills or yard work. Something as simple as making it a point to pop in for a [visit](#) once a week goes a long way.

Complicated Grief

Grief-related depression is often conflated with a condition known as complicated grief. While these conditions can be intertwined — the disruptive effects of clinical depression can interfere with the processing of grief, setting the stage for complicated grief — they are different diagnoses and can occur independently of one another.

In complicated grief, the bereaved person gets stuck in the acute stage of grief, and is unable to process their loss in a way that leads to eventual acceptance. Instead, they land in a cycle of preoccupation with the nature of their loved one's death, longing for the deceased, disbelief in the death, and an inability to accept it, and intense, irrational sorrow, bitterness, and anger. People experiencing complicated grief may oscillate between obsessing over memories and belongings of their loved one, and excessive avoidance of anything that reminds them of the deceased.

While complicated grief isn't the same as clinical depression, a person experiencing these symptoms may also benefit from grief counseling.

It can be difficult to diagnose clinical depression in someone who has recently experienced a traumatic loss. In fact, doctors are often [warned against](#) diagnosing depression within the two months following a loss due to the overlap between the symptoms of grief and depression. However, grief triggers or amplifies depression frequently enough that it's important to be aware of the signs that normal grieving has evolved into something more. Keep a close watch on your loved one and make note of any changes in behavior or mood to bring up with their family doctor. After the loss of their spouse, you are now their biggest advocate.