

Grief, Loss and Bereavement in Aged Care

Grief and loss associated with deterioration and death for people using aged care services is an important issue for the sector. We need to consider how best to support older people at the end of life, their families and friends, and the staff who provide care.

In 2020, there were 161,300 deaths in Australia and two-thirds were among people aged 75 and over. Around half of these deaths were in hospital and thirty percent in residential aged care. Most people adapt to the death of a family member or friend over time and their grief is managed with support from friends, family, and community. But some people will experience worsening quality of life and may struggle to deal with complicated or prolonged grief. Grief and bereavement resources are available to support older people, families and friends, and the aged care workforce.

Understanding bereavement in aged

Grief can have significant impacts on individuals and on communities. Older people can feel pain associated with loss in their life including declining health, increasing dependence and the need to use aged care services including residential aged care. Families and carers can also anticipate and experience grief associated with these transition and changes.

Grief is also experienced with declining health, dying and bereavement. Older people and their families can be anxious and fearful about what is happening and approaching the end of life may also raise issues from earlier in their life.


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Bereavement in context

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Many older people have experienced grief, losses, and bereavements. Grief may follow losses associated with health problems, loss of independence or changes in relationships. Grief can include a complex mix of emotions including loneliness, sadness, pain, remorse, self-blame, relief, anger, and betrayal. [1] Limited social networks associated with advancing age can exacerbate stress and distress felt by older people and their families and carers. [2] Older people are more likely to have experienced multiple bereavements compared with other age groups affecting their quality of life and increasing the likelihood of complicated grief. [3]

Differences between people and between specific population groups may also affect how older people experience grief and loss and how their families will be affected by bereavement. Trauma experienced during their life can influence the care choices of older people and their preparation for death and the grief of family members. Grief and bereavement issues can also be faced when looking at cultural differences in end of life and bereavement, among those living with dementia or caring for a person living with dementia as well as forgotten Australians. [4] Acknowledging that grief may be felt before a death by the person at the end of life as well as by families can open the possibility for support and comfort. After death information about bereavement may help partners, families and friends to navigate the experience of grief following a death.

Residential aged care

In Australia, a significant number of families are affected by the decision to enter – and subsequent death of someone in – residential aged care. However, the experience of bereavement is not well studied in a residential aged care context. Bereavement and its effects on staff and other residents is under-recognised and underacknowledged. For many people in residential aged care (both staff and residents), it is a silent experience. [5]

A recent project looked at the bereavement, grief and loss of the families of those living in, or entering, residential aged care in South Australia. A systematic review, interviews and focus group discussions with families, caregivers and aged care staff showed that grief occurs well before death and that transition to residential aged care is an emotionally difficult time for family caregivers and residents. Importantly, supportive transition into the aged care can support well-being across entry, deterioration, dying and bereavement. [6] Findings from this study echo other research where feelings of grief, loss, guilt, and regret were experienced, along with feelings of relief and reassurance that the resident would be well cared.

The reality of covid

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the aged care sector in Australia. Aged care has experienced an unexpected set of deaths as well as workforce COVID-19 infections

Download the Bereavement in context evidence brief (207kb pdf)

Impacts on aged care workforce



Grief and bereavement not only affects older people and their families but the workforce providing care. Looking after people who are coming towards the end of their life can have an impact on how you act and feel.

Practising self-care can help you maintain your physical, mental, and emotional well-being so you can continue to care.

Staff working in aged care face specific challenges which may increase the risk of burnout. Staffing pressures, increasing demand for care, increasing complexity of care needs, family expectations, and risks of injury and abuse have all been seen as possible contributors to a workplace enabling burnout. Aged care organisations can also consider how they can prevent staff burnout and support workforce health. ARIIA has an aged care topic on Staff Burnout.

Resources

palliAGED has a series of resources to support those affected by grief and bereavement in aged care. There are also resources developed by CareSearch partner projects.

Supporting families

- CareSearch has a section called Older Australia. It maps resources and services associated with the ageing journey including a section on Grieving.
- CareSearch has a section on Diversity. It recognises that people have different backgrounds and different life experiences. It includes a section on Resources in your language providing access to information on palliative care, services, and grief in multiple languages.
- The Patient and Carers section in CareSearch includes information on Bereavement, grief and loss.
- A printed booklet, When someone dies in residential aged care: Grief and Loss for Families (5.34MB pdf) reassures families about the reality of their emotions and offers practical suggestions and information about helpful resources.
- CarerHelp has information on Grief and Loss for family carers and resources for different groups in our community

Supporting workers

- palliAGED Practice tips For Nurses and For Careworkers provide information on Self care, Grief and Loss among Older People, Families and Residents and Grief and Loss among staff.
- palliAGED has produced self-care forms for the aged care team and for carers.
- Practising self-care can help you maintain your physical, mental and emotional well-being so you can continue to care. ELDAC's Self-care room is a place for aged care workers, with resources to discover and explore.
- palliAGED has an evidence summary on bereavement and Practice Tips on Bereavement.
- CarerHelp has resources for support workers who finds themselves supporting a person at th end of life as part of their role.

Grief Organisations

- Grief Australia provides support and resources for people with experiencing grief.
- Aged Care Grief and Bereavement Support provides a range of information and resources for people living and working in aged care.

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