

Loss in the Elderly



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Opinion

As we go through life, we all at one time or other experience some sense of loss. This loss may manifest itself in the loss of a spouse, a friend, a parent or relative. The older we get this sense of loss grows and increases in intensity since with every loss we seem to become more aware of our own existence and how life is passing us by. It fills us with nostalgia for what could have been or for times past and makes us at times fear what the future will hold. Loss effects different people in different ways, which in turn effects the ways in which we cope with it. It may be sudden giving us little time to adapt, catching us unawares, bringing with its sudden changes, which in turn require certain decisions to be taken. One of these decisions may in fact be the need of looking into long term care.

The death of a spouse is one of the main reasons why the elderly or their relatives may consider looking into long term care services. The loss of a lifelong partner may be accompanied with the lack of motivation to cook for oneself, to socialise with others or to care for one's basic needs. The house may become too big to care for, and the children may be too busy to take care of the parent which is left behind. Living in a Care Home on the other hand may bring with it a sense of belonging, a safe place where people may meet and socialise. It brings with it a sense of community where one can find other people of the same age group, who may have, or are passing through the same experience of loss. Experiences bring people together and a solace in knowing that they are during people who can understand what they are going through and who can empathise with their state of being. This is where the staff within the care home too are very important and need to complement this feeling. Staff must allow the person to bereave, whilst being there by listening and encouraging them in small steps to move on and integrate in this new environment. Since not everyone bereaves in the same way, staff need to be experienced and alert to certain signs in the behaviour of elderly residents which may be a reflection of bereavement and which may in turn lead to a depressive state; where residents may be observed to become more withdrawn, start to eat less or lack the motivation to self-care.

Loss does not always have to be extreme as in death. It is a known fact that any loss one experiences, big or small, can lead to a degree of bereavement. A person may experience loss of function due to a sudden stroke, loss of a limb or eyesight due to a history of diabetes, or loss of independence due to a debilitating condition which has got worse with age. All these losses must be recognised by those caring for the elderly and they must have the skills to help them cope with this loss and reach a stage of acceptance to live with it. Staff need to recognise that any loss will lead one to go through bereavement and its different stages.

They need to recognise that people will oscillate between emotions at different times and that no one will progress systematically through each stage. Staff therefore need to listen, to recognise where the person is at, empathise, and at times explain to the person that what they are passing through is comprehensible. Relatives sometimes too need educating, since they may not realise that their elderly relative is bereaving and instead may at times get angry because they feel that the elderly person is giving up or is not trying hard enough. On the other hand, relatives may be coping with their own bereavement.... the loss of a mum who cannot recognise them as she suffers from dementia, a dad who may have suddenly had a stroke and cannot communicate anymore. Therefore, relatives too need support and staff must include them in the residents' plans and goals especially on the resident's admission, to a Care Home and when drawing up the resident's care plan.

The commitment in the ethos which runs through Simblija Care Home is that of better quality of life, which includes the development of coping mechanisms to deal with any loss and the support given as one does this. It is an ethos which puts the resident at the centre of its care, giving him/her an individualised plan based on their needs, their coping skills and which is set out at their pace. At Simblija Care Home we understand that care is never one size fits all and with the emotions that are involved to deal with loss and bereavement this is even more so. Therefore, through a partnership with the resident and their family, at Simblija we can reach the best outcomes in order to give residents the quality of life they deserve whilst learning to live with a loss of any kind or dimension.



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