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Many senior centers and churches in West Virginia have grief support groups. Some are run by professionals, and some simply function like book groups.

Look for opportunities in your area for a community or group that will share your grief.

Book Suggestions:

- Tear Soup by Pat Schwiebert
- Tuesdays With Morrie by Mitch Albom
- I Wasn't Ready to Say Goodbye by Brook Noel
- A Grief Observed by C. S. Lewis

Grief Support for Older Adults

Coping with the death of a loved one can be difficult for anyone. But if you're a senior adult, the experience can be a greater struggle simply by nature of your stage in life. Health problems, loss of independence and other issues that accompany growing older can compound and heighten grief. Moreover, an emotional support system that used to exist may no longer be in place because peers have passed and adult children may be busy with their own lives.



Cynthia Oliver, Director of the Good Grief Center for Bereavement Support, a division of Ursuline Senior Services in Pittsburgh, says bereavement can be especially painful for seniors. "Society can forget about the special needs of older adults who are grieving," she said. "Life changes dramatically when they lose a spouse. They struggle with figuring out who they are and how to navigate life without their lifelong partner. If they have been a loving caregiver, they often have given up their own support system of friends and social circles. If a grandchild dies, the grandparent grieves twice: they grieve the loss of the grandchild while carrying the pain of their own child's suffering."

Nothing can take the pain of grief away, but there are ways to help an individual handle their grief and restore hope. It's important to work through the pain of loss by talking about it and getting support from others who understand how they feel.

What Grief Is and Isn't

"Grief is a process, not an event," Oliver explains. "It's a natural and normal human reaction to the death of someone we love, and it takes time to heal." According to Oliver, everyone grieves in their own way and at their own pace; there's no set timeframe. It's a highly personal experience. People often feel that they should be able to manage their loss alone and are hesitant to ask for help, but it's healthy to reach out and get support, she says. Knowing what to expect and talking with others who have experienced the same thing can help to ease the pain.

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“Anyone over the age of 65 generally is trying to come to terms with their own mortality as well as that of their aging friends and family members,” Ursuline Executive Director Anthony Turo says. “When you add to this the fact that they also may be dealing with physical ailments, a fixed income, taking care of elderly parents, or other life stresses, it becomes clear how bereavement could take an extreme toll on their entire life and how a stable support system would be beneficial.”

Ways to Encourage Self-Healing

Although there is no specific process, formula, or right way for you to manage grief, there are healthy, effective ways to promote self-healing. Some examples:

Find a steady support system. Talk about your loss with trusted friends, family members or a professional; or attend a support group.

- Don't avoid the pain. Let yourself enter the emotions of grief — sadness, anger, intense longing, guilt and others.
- Tell your deceased loved one how you feel. Consider writing him or her a letter, stating what you would do if you had one more chance.
- Don't neglect your health or nutritional needs. Grief puts a heavy burden of stress on your body. It can disturb sleep patterns, lead to depression, and weaken the immune system.
- Create a memorial to your loved one. Plant a garden, write a poem to frame and display, or make a special photo album.

Ways to Help a Grieving Senior

Knowing what to do or say to help a bereaved senior friend or family member can be a challenge, too. Here are ways to offer support:

- Acknowledge the loss. In conversation, use the deceased person's name; it's comforting. Avoid euphemisms such as “passed away” or “left this world.” Instead, say “died.” Share your favorite memories of the deceased.
- Speak from the heart. Avoid trite comments such as, “Time heals all wounds.” They diminish the loss. Instead, be genuine: “I can't imagine how hard this must be for you,” or simply, “I'm so sorry for your loss.” Never say, “I know how you feel.” You don't; grief is a unique experience.
- Listen attentively. Be a healing presence by being a good listener. Talking is a way of expressing grief. They may need to tell their story over and over; it helps them to process and accept the death. If they don't feel like talking, offer to sit with them in silence.
- Be understanding. Allow them to grieve in their own way and as long as they need to without fear of criticism or judgment. Don't tell them what they “should” be feeling. Respect their decision to not attend social or other events.
- Offer practical assistance. Don't wait to be asked for help. Initiate. “I'm going to the grocery store. Can I pick something up for you?” Offer to run errands, help pay bills, or look after pets.

“The goal of grief support is not to stop the pain or forget about the loved one, but to help individuals live with the loved one's memory in a way that doesn't cause pain,” Oliver says. “That's why we don't use the term closure; it implies closing a door to all of the love and memories, which is unhealthy. Instead, we help individuals to achieve resolution, which implies accepting the loss and resolving to continue life with warm memories of the deceased.”

