

# Coping with loss means making a host of changes

By Stefanie White, McKinney Courier-Gazette

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For senior citizens who have been married for many years, the death of a spouse is often a painful loss that can be difficult to adjust to.

Molly Harrison, bereavement coordinator at the Visiting Nurse Association in McKinney, said the time to get over the loss of a spouse can depend on different variables.

"So much has to do with what the relationship was like, what they depended on that person for, how interdependent they were in the relationship," Harrison said.

In some households, Harrison said, spouses have a specific role, such as the husband taking care of the finances and the wife tending to the home.

"When the spouse who handled those jobs is gone, it's a whole new adjustment," Harrison said. "When they're an older couple, it's awfully hard to make those kinds of changes."

Harrison said the first part of the grieving process is to accept the reality of the loss of the spouse. "People might have moments or seconds where they forget the person is gone," Harrison said. "There's a huge sense of disbelief. As that lifts, they begin to feel the pain and numbness."

Though the temptation to suppress feelings is there, Harrison said the surviving spouse should express grief.

"To be healthy with your feelings, it's very important to express your feelings," Harrison said. "For some people, that's crying. For some people, that's journaling."

Mary Jane Douglas, caregiver support coordinator for the Collin County Committee on Aging, said going to a support group can help seniors cope with their loss.

Douglas said grieving seniors should also try to surround themselves with family and friends who can help them during the grieving process.

"It's extremely important they try to keep their socialization," Douglas said. "Try not to isolate yourself. It's healthy to get out and talk about that person you're grieving about to other people."

Douglas said adopting a pet can help fill the void for the surviving spouse. "Having someone in the house can provide good companionship," Douglas said.

Douglas said establishing new traditions during the holidays can also help a person cope with the loss of a spouse.

"Sometimes they need to change their traditions during the holidays," Douglas said. "Sometimes, it's too painful to do the same tradition you've done every year."

Carey Coleman, geriatric manager for Senior Select Home Health Services, said men often have a harder time dealing with the loss of a spouse than women.

"Men tend to have a much more difficult time with it specifically at this age, they don't have as much of a social support," Coleman said.

Coleman said men are more likely to get remarried after the death of a spouse, especially if they are younger.

"When you get into your 80s, there's the expectation life is coming to an end," Coleman said.

Depending on if they are working or retired, Coleman said men can dive into activities such as volunteering.

"They get so involved in something because they're lonely," Coleman said. "They usually get involved in an activity where they're involved with other people."

For the most part, Coleman said, women tend to handle the loss better than men although older women who have been married may have more difficult time.

Grieving the loss of a loved one can be a difficult process but Harrison said the surviving spouse will eventually be able to move on.

"It's a process and it takes time. You make baby steps," Harrison said. "But it gets better."