

PATHWAYS CENTER for GRIEF & LOSS

GRIEVING WHEN COGNITIVELY IMPAIRED

Elderly persons with cognitive impairment may have difficulty processing their loss. They may even forget that their loved one has died, repeatedly asking others when the deceased is coming to visit. This can prove devastating for such individuals and their families who are forced to repeatedly re-experience their grief.

Most experts believe a cognitively impaired individual should be told of the loss initially, and then any further information or action should be based on that reaction. Continuing to tell a person over and over again that their loved one has died may not be helpful.

Women and men typically (but not always) grieve differently – cognitive impairment doesn't change that.

- Women are more likely to cry, need support from others and express their emotions
- Men may not express their emotions (except for anger), and may not be willing to talk about how they feel.

How to help...

- If the person *asks* for information about their loved one's death, gently repeat what you know of the facts, or offer to find out for them.
- Address any other losses secondary to the grief such as a change in residence, for example.
- Support in a calm environment with limited distractions, using simple language and appropriate eye contact.
- If they become confused or have difficulty with answering questions, offer reassurance.
- If the person is aware and able in some way to process the loss, allow that to occur, and just 'walk the path' with him or her.
- Reminisce with them about the person who died. Talk about where they lived and what they did together
- Talk about pictures which they may have displayed.
- Listen for and help to identify possible feelings of longing, sadness or fear.
- Offer a comforting hug.
- Listen well, make the person's reality *your* reality.

Betsy was in her 90's and becoming more forgetful by the week. One of her recurring stories was about seat belts. The story always ended with the sentence, "He wouldn't start the car unless my seat belt was fastened." She told the story over and over again. Weeks later, Betsy added a poignant sentence to her story. "Ohhhh, I miss my husband." This wasn't a story about car safety, it was a story about grief and loneliness.

- - *Alzheimer's: Finding the Words, Harriet Hodgson, © Wiley 1995*



Prepared by Pathways Center for Grief & Loss, 4075 Old Harrisburg Pike, Mount Joy, PA 17552
Phone: (717) 391-2413 or (800) 924-7610 ♦ info@pathwaysthroughgrief.org
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