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# Coping with life after losing a loved one

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For many people, especially seniors, coping with the death of a loved one can seem impossible and overwhelming, but there is help and hope. There are numerous bereavement support groups in Queens where one can find comfort and assistance.

Bereavement, which literally means "to be deprived by death," can cause a whole range of emotions including: denial, disbelief, confusion, shock, sadness, yearning, anger, humiliation, despair and guilt, according to Mental Health America, a national nonprofit dedicated to helping people live healthier lives.

The intense unpredictability of these emotions, though a normal part of grieving, according to MHA, can make people question their mental stability or how they will cope. Everyone handles the process differently and although the pain never completely goes away, it does ease with time, but that can take months or even years.

Outward expressions of mourning such as crying, sadness, anger, lack of interest in usual activities, trouble eating and sleeping, and nightmares are likely to occur, but there are also more serious reactions such as anxiety attacks, depression, chronic fatigue, suicidal thoughts or an obsession with the deceased.

About one in five bereaved people will develop clinical depression, according to the American Cancer Society. Sufferers who experience the following for two months or more or try to injure themselves should seek help immediately, according to the ACS

— constant thoughts of being worthless or hopeless, inability to perform daily activities, intense guilt over things done or not done at the time of the loved one's death, delusions, hallucinations, slower body responses and reactions, extreme weight loss or ongoing thoughts of death or suicide.

Those who are at the highest risk for depression are those who live alone and have no support, have suffered from depression in the past, have battled alcohol or drug abuse or have had major life stresses. Sufferers may be helped by medication or through therapy.

"They become depressed. They can't believe it. They're angry. They're lonely. They don't know how they are going to move on without their significant other," said Norma Rivera, a social worker at the Selfhelp Maspeth Senior Center who periodically runs a bereavement group there and has a master's degree in social work with particular expertise in death and dying. "For many women there is a loss of income and a sense of confusion. They never had to write a check before or worry about paying bills."

Rivera said the Selfhelp Maspeth group should begin meeting again sometime at the beginning of next year. It's a 12-week program and no additional members are accepted after the first two weeks. The center requires that the participant's loved one has passed away at least six months prior to joining the group, because any time before that is just too soon to start dealing with feelings publicly, Rivera said. For more information, the center can be reached at (718) 429-3636.

"They share stories and they find that they have things in common — the depression, the anger, the denial," Rivera said of the bereavement group members.

"They make friendships that carry on after the group is over and they begin to do different activities."

Sights, smells, sounds, anniversaries and holidays can all serve as reminders of the deceased and shared times, re-triggering feelings of sadness and loss, according to the Mayo Clinic. When these setbacks occur, it may be helpful to plan a distraction; focus on pleasant memories of the deceased rather than the fact that they're gone; create a memorial in the loved one's honor; connect with friends or join a support group; and remind oneself that people are capable of feeling a variety of emotions, not just loss and sadness, but joy and happiness as well.

In order to make progress and move on with one's life, people must allow themselves to mourn and express their feelings. If they don't, it may lead to a condition known as "complicated grief," according to the MHA.

Oftentimes sufferers will not believe or accept that their loved one has died, and may even maintain a fantasy relationship with the person as though he or she is always present and watching. They may yearn or search for the deceased. They can experience



flashbacks, nightmares, or memories that become more frequent over time. They may have prolonged feelings of anger, sadness, or depression.

For seniors, the death of a spouse, in many cases a person with whom they've shared their lives for decades, can be especially traumatic because they may live alone, or perhaps the person's close friends are also deceased and that can increase vulnerability.

"As you can imagine, if you are married for 50 or 60 years or sometimes longer and you lose that person, you lose your whole world," said Bobbie Sackman, director of public policy at the Council of Senior Centers and Services. "Sometimes you yourself are at a stage in your life where you may have some mental or cognitive challenges and you've just lost your major support system. It's painful, and as human beings it reminds us of our own mortality."

Holy Family Church in Flushing has a bereavement support group on the first Wednesday and third Tuesday of every month from 7:30 to 9 p.m. in the rectory basement at 175-20 74 Ave. For more information, call (718) 969-2448.

St. Francis of Assisi in Astoria has a support group that meets at 1 p.m. every Wednesday in the basement behind the church rectory and there is also an evening session at 7 p.m. at the same location, 21-17 45 St. For more information, call (718) 728-7801. It is part of Catholic Charities of New York, which has a whole host of bereavement groups throughout the borough, which are listed on their website at [ccbq.org/bereavement.htm](http://ccbq.org/bereavement.htm)