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# Along The Way

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## "WHEN I GROW TOO OLD TO GRIEVE"

### The Grief of the Elderly

By John Kennedy Saynor



**W**hen does a person become too old to grieve? Never! In fact, the older we get, the more losses we experience and, therefore, we have more reasons to grieve.

The grief experienced by those who are older is unique. Much that has been written about grief is geared to younger and middle-aged people. Very little has been written to address the grief of the elderly. An older person may grieve the death of a spouse, child, grandchild or close friend and companion. An older person may also grieve the loss of mobility, independence, health and well-being. There are unique factors that affect how an older person grieves. There are potential limitations our elders experience that may hinder their grieving process. There are, however, ways in which older people can be helped, or help themselves, to do their grieving in a healthy and helpful way.

It is difficult to write about the grief of the elderly without first recognizing that, like any other group, one can't generalize. There are many people who enjoy good health well into their 90s. However, that is not the rule. So, I would like to raise some issues that address the grief of the elderly in general. First, let us look at potential limitations.

**1** Health limitations: It isn't always obvious to the person ♦ their own health is in decline. Physical limitations creep up on us. Eyesight, hearing, memory and physical strength losses are just some of the limitations an older person may experience. This means that the person is unable to get out and social activity becomes limited.

**2** Financial limitations: If a spouse has died, in many cases, ♦ the monthly income is less. Perhaps the survivor hasn't been accustomed to managing the household finances. In that case, there may be a certain amount of insecurity around how to take on this new responsibility.

**3** Limitations in amount of support available: For many older ♦ people, the amount of personal support may be limited because many of their family and friends have already died or are ill. Furthermore, family members may live many miles away. So the bereaved elderly may not have the support they might otherwise have had if the death had occurred when they were in midlife.



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**4** ♦ Social limitations: The elderly are often limited in what they can do socially. It is often a combination of the above limitations: health, finances and support systems. Younger people can usually go out with friends and begin to quickly rebuild their lives. But for many who are older this is either more difficult to do, or simply, not possible.

### Factors of Grief Unique to the Elderly

With every group of people there are factors that affect how they grieve. For the elderly, there are some unique factors that may complicate their ability to successfully recover from their grief. Here are some of them.

**1** ♦ Multiple losses. By the time people approach their 80s many of their family members and friends have died. This creates a serious void in the amount of support available to them. The lack of family and friends creates a huge vacuum in their social life and increases their loneliness.

**2** ♦ The “Am I Next?” syndrome. Finding the names of friends and family in the death notices on a regular basis and attending those funerals makes a senior very aware of the inevitable – their own death. This in itself brings a sadness to many and, to some, it is the light at the end of the tunnel.

**3** ♦ Role adjustment. Depending on how a husband and wife have defined their

roles, there will most certainly be new roles to assume when one dies or becomes ill. A younger senior woman may find herself learning how to start the lawnmower and do things her husband would never have allowed her to do. Acquiring this new knowledge may be confusing and frustrating. It may also prove that, in fact, you can “teach an old dog new tricks!”

**4** ♦ Need for touch. A woman who had been widowed for some years said to me recently, “I miss the hugs!” There are still many couples who celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary. Fifty years of life together and lots of hugs creates a longing in a grieving person that often isn’t to be fulfilled.

**5** ♦ Possibility of relocation. The older you are, the greater the possibility that you will have to move following the death of a spouse or loss of your own health or financial security. This possibility creates a great deal of fear, anxiety and insecurity. The loss of one’s home is another great loss to be mourned in addition to the other losses unique to the elderly.

Although the grief of the elderly can often be complicated by the above factors and the limitations they experience, it is still possible, with love and support, for an older person to make a successful recovery and discover that life still has meaning and joy. The following article entitled “Offering Assistance to the Grieving Elderly” will hopefully provide some helpful insights for family members and friends.

*John Kennedy Saynor is the founder of GENESIS Bereavement Resources. He can be reached through his website:  
[www.genesis-resources.com](http://www.genesis-resources.com).*





# Offering Assistance to the Grieving Elderly

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Although the previous article may indicate that the grief of the elderly is an impossible grief, that is not the case. Many elderly people, given support and encouragement, make a good recovery from their loss. Life can become meaningful and happy again. Here are some tips I hope will be helpful.

1 Be a good listener. Allow them to talk about the one who has died. You may have to listen to the same story many times. That is part of the process. Each time grief is shared, the pain is diminished.

2 Encourage your elderly loved one to identify ways they have coped with previous crises. Encourage them to see that they were able to survive those difficult times. They can now draw on the same strengths.

3 Encourage the survivor to become part of a bereavement support group. Many elderly resist this idea because, for many, support groups have not been part of their life. However, my experience has been that older people do very well in a group and gain a great deal from that experience.

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4 Pets are helpful for the person who is grieving or living alone. A pet provides another live presence to care for. A cat or dog, in particular, will give unconditional love in return.

5 Learn what community resources are available that could enhance your loved one's social network. There are many groups and activities that an older person can become involved in even if they have major limitations. New things can be learned and a whole new group of people can be added to their existing network.



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6 ♦ Encourage the person to try activities they may enjoy inside or outside the home. It is preferable if the activity is not a reminder of the deceased. This would give them a sense of new accomplishment and of moving on.

7 ♦ Watch for signs of depression. Examples are poor appetite, disinterest in life activities, lack of interest in personal care or appearance, withdrawal from family and friends, or in extreme cases, talk of suicide. Follow your intuition and consult a private counsellor or physician if you have any concerns.

8 ♦ Be patient. Offer to help, but more importantly, make suggestions as to how you can help. A lift to the grocery store, accompanying the person to a doctor's appointment or an invitation to a dinner at your home are a few practical suggestions.

9 ♦ Don't judge! The values and beliefs of an older bereaved person may be quite different from yours. If these values have worked for them so far, they will probably prove to be just as helpful now.

10 ♦ Support their spiritual quest. Older people often have a faith system that has supported them through many difficult times. The death of a spouse or child may test that faith. However, their faith may also be a source of great support and encouragement. Encourage them to draw on the resources of a lifelong faith.

*John Kennedy Saynor is the founder of GENESIS Bereavement Resources. He can be reached through his website:  
[www.genesis-resources.com](http://www.genesis-resources.com).*

**Paradise Row**  
111 Paradise Row  
Saint John, N.B. E2K 3H6  
**506-634-7424**

**Brenan's**  
 **FUNERAL HOMES  
& CREMATORIUM**  
[www.BrenansFH.com](http://www.BrenansFH.com)

**Bay View**  
1461 Manawagonish Road  
West Saint John, N.B. E2M 3X8  
**506-634-7425**