



Specificity of Widowhood in the Elderly

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Stressors in Old Age (Beaver and Miller, 1992)

- Change of residence
- Social isolation and loneliness
- **Widowhood**
- Marriage and family problems
- Sexual problems
- Retirement



Tasks in Old Age (R. Havighurst, 1950)

- Adjustment to reduced physical strength;
- Adjustment to retirement and lower income;
- **Adjustment to death of a spouse;**
- Establishing a clear membership of your own age group;
- Meeting social and civic obligations;
- Establishing satisfactory living conditions.



Normal Reactions to Loss (Worden, 2005)

- 1) feelings: sorrow, anger, guilt and grievance of conscience, anxiety, loneliness, fatigue, helplessness, shock, liberation
- 2) body reactions: gastric emptiness, chest or throat tightness, shortness of breath, muscular weakness, dry mouth
- 3) thoughts: disbelief, confusion, excessive preoccupation, feeling of the presence of the deceased
- 4) behaviours: sleep disorders, appetite disorders, withdrawal from society, dreams about the deceased, search for the deceased, keeping his / her belongings, etc.



Some Signs of Difficult / Complicated Mourning (Arambašić, 2005)

- feeling like the loss was experienced "yesterday" even though death occurred months or years ago
- continued mourning a number of years after a loss accompanied by crying, rumbling of voice or intense feeling of sadness when speaking about it
- the topic of loss occurs during each conversation
- long-term preservation of all things of the deceased
- symptoms identical to those the deceased had experienced
- long-term absence from work, lack of personal hygiene, lack of household care, neglecting children ...
- self-destructive behaviour etc.



Changes in Marital Relationship in Old Age (Pernar, 2010)

1. **Retirement** – spouses spend a lot more time together than before (they feel strong interdependence, men become more dependent on women, less competitive and seek more family relations);
2. **Death of a spouse** – involves more losses: the loss of a sex partner, a protector from afflictions, a friend, a person of trust, a person with whom we used to share the responsibility for important decisions, a person to have fun with, material security, social status, full home and the second parent of our children.



Characteristics of Mourning after Loss of a Partner in Older Age:

- **interdependence** - if marriage lasted for a long time it has led to deep affection and entrenched habits or family roles: spouses have become dependent on each other, which makes it more difficult to adapt to loss
- **multiple losses** - ageing increases the number of deaths of friends and family members, loss of work, environment, bodypower, health, weakened senses and brain functions
- **consciousness of one's own mortality** - can lead to existential anxiety
- **loneliness** – living alone in the same environment that you had previously shared with your partner can lead to strong feelings of loneliness
- **adjustment to new roles** - especially for men who face new roles (e.g. household chores)



Differences in Adaptation to Widowhood in Males and Females of Old Age

- Stroebe and Schut (1999) indicate that women are more oriented to loss and men on the recovery;
- Women point out the need to share feelings with others, and men need to know how others managed to cope with a similar situation;



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- Bennett et al. (2006) found the differences in expressing feelings - men are more depressive and express negative emotions, while women express more anger;
 - Men use physical activity to get rid of loss-related negative emotions, while women are more likely to do that through conversation.
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Supporting Mourners

- Natural supporters: members of narrower and wider families, friends, neighbours, colleagues
 - Professionals: teachers, educators, professors rehabilitators, nurses, doctors, social workers, priests and others
 - Support groups or self-help groups
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Results of our Research – 2013, 2015

Aim:

Investigate the specificity of widowhood in old age, in both men and women

- Women - beneficiaries of the Palliative Care Coordination Centre in Zagreb (N=8)
- Men - beneficiaries of the Gerontology Centre (N=9)
- Criteria for participation in research: at least 6 months passed since the loss of a spouse



Experience of losing partner and ways of coping

women

- Longing for the deceased: the feeling of the presence of the deceased; communicating with the deceased
- Rationalization of loss: a sense of relief; satisfaction due to care well taken for a sick partner; reflection on life after death; practicing religious practices
- Ways of coping: reciprocity in providing and receiving support from children; socialising with friends / acquaintances; doing housework

men

- Extremely unpleasant experience: shock, trauma
- Ways of coping: support of family members; expansion of hobbies (sports activities, reading); socialising with friends and conversations; socialising with other widowers and help/ing



Specific Problems That the Elderly Face during Widowhood

women

- Undeveloped social life: spending free time at home (taking care of a husband for last few years, they stopped going out), a sense of loneliness
- Being overwhelmed by negative emotions: feelings of deep sadness, anger and guilt; reliving the moments that preceded death

men

- New position in society and new tasks: going on excursions, to the market, to shopping; takeover of household chores
- Being overwhelmed by negative emotions: the impossibility of controlling emotions, the feeling of terrible solitude, the feeling of guilt



What services have beneficiaries got from:

- ***Centre for Coordination of Palliative care in Zagreb***: assistance in the procurement of medical supplies, individual counseling, home visits, organisation of meetings for mourning
- ***Gerontology Centre***: the possibility of having lunch, doing tasks within the Centre, new friendships, involvement in free activities the Centre offers, conversations with professionals and counseling with social workers



Respondents' Proposals for Offering Help in Widowhood

women

- More meetings throughout a longer period of time
- The need for volunteers who will come to widows' homes and talk with them
- The need for individual counseling (frequent occurrence of an image of a deceased husband even after 6 months of his death, which is disturbing)

men

- Possibility of accommodation in homes for the elderly
- Legal assistance on inheritance issues



Conclusion

- For older women and men widowhood is a stressful, unpleasant and painful experience.
- In the first year of widowhood, support and assistance is provided within the family, although some need professional help as well.
- Care should be taken to approach every grieving person individually, because mourning, as well as life, is an **INDIVIDUAL PROCESS**.
- Women should be provided with small support groups, where they can talk about their loss (in their own home or within the community where they live).
- Men need community services to stay as long as possible in their own home and a possibility to go to the home for the elderly if needed.
- Professionals who work with older people need to be educated how to recognise complications that may occur during mourning process.
- It is necessary to organise forums and various programmes on the subject of mourning and widowhood, with the aim of removing taboos connected with serious life events and starting public sensitisation on such issues.



**As experts, we should promote
values of communion, concern and hope for
each other,
especially in moments when people think
that those values disappeared together with those
who left them / us.**

