

Staying Connected through Life Transitions

Most seniors look forward to retirement, with an expectation of more leisure time and fewer demands and responsibilities. In many cases, however, seniors and their families are not adequately prepared for the stresses that also accompany aging.

How life transitions can challenge social connections:

Death of a partner

Following the death of a partner, seniors are more susceptible to health problems, depression and cognitive problems. Grief can lead to sleeplessness, loss of appetite, a lowered immune system as well as loss of interest in one's own care and well-being. The risk of an elderly person dying is greatly increased within the first three months following the death of his or her spouse.

New responsibilities

Even for seniors in good health, there will likely be many new and overwhelming tasks to learn after losing a partner. Having to acquire these new skills during a time of grief can seem insurmountable.

Loss of independence

An older couple may maintain independence by helping one another. After the death of a wife or husband, the surviving spouse may no longer be able to manage daily tasks. This can cause shame, grief and social withdrawal.

Loss of driver's license

The ability to operate a car can change quickly, even unexpectedly for an older adult. Losing a license can be followed by depression and a significant loss in quality of life.

Relocation to a new home

Moving can be traumatic at any age. It is especially difficult when you have decades of memories and need to throw out or give away household items. Moving signals the end of an era and represents a loss of control. The thought of moving leaves many paralyzed, putting off moving or even creating a plan until the need to move becomes urgent.

GRIEF is a natural response to the death of a loved one. Healthy grieving can last for months or even years. However, sometimes seniors experience continuous grief that does not subside, and they may need help from health care and social services.

ISOLATION can worsen following the loss of a spouse, who may have once been the primary social network for an older adult living independently. Signs of isolation include poor self-care, such as skipping meals, and neglecting positive routines, such as shopping, taking a walk or visiting the library.



Helping seniors maintain social connections:



Provide Support

- Your involvement and support as a family member, friend or neighbour can make a big difference to an isolated senior.
- Find out about helpful resources in your community through your Community Seniors Resource Guide.
- Consider outreach programs like Meals on Wheels, which help to support socially isolated seniors.
- Hone your listening skills. Find resources that can help you talk to loved ones and others affected by aging. Talking about aging is unlikely to make seniors upset. They will probably appreciate the chance to discuss their problems.
- Identify signs of potential isolation or risks to health.

Encourage Regular Participation

- Help older adults to build their social network and create a sense of community.
- Check out your Community Seniors Guide for activities that may be of interest.
- Encourage them to take part in a walking programs or seek a walking companion.
- Educate seniors, family, friends and clients about active living programs, seniors' centres and transportation options for older adults.

Help Seniors Feel Connected and Valued

- For transportation options available to seniors in your community, check out your Community Seniors Guide.
- Help older adults find information, programs and services to help them feel included and to meet their basic social needs.
- Support older adults in finding meaningful social connections.

Encourage Activities to Improve and Maintain Cognition

- Stimulate older adults' interest in enjoyable mental activities like socializing, crossword puzzles, reading, sudoku and playing cards.
- Encourage older adults to accept cognitive aging as a normal part of getting older and to find ways to work around it (write lists, set timers and alarms for appointments and events, and leave reminder notes where seniors will be sure to see them).
- Encourage seniors to talk about cognitive changes with others - friends and family members may have great suggestions for strategies

