

INFORMATION FOR AGED CARE WORKERS

Trauma, loss and grief in older people: What do I need to do?

**Phoenix**
AUSTRALIA

Trauma and loss can cause ongoing distress and health problems

An older person can be deeply affected by a recent trauma like suddenly losing a loved one through COVID-19, or by a trauma that happened earlier in their life, even during childhood.

Going into an aged care home, and ageing itself, can also cause grief and loss. It can involve losing their home, people they care about, their independence or mobility.

What can I do to help?

Anyone can help a person who is suffering from trauma, loss or grief by offering comfort and support. You can also help them to get the professional help and treatment they need.

Help the person to feel safe, and always treat them with respect

- Remember that changes in a person's behaviour, such as becoming aggressive or refusing to do something, may be related to trauma, loss and grief.
- Ask "How are you today?" or, if they seem agitated, irritable or sad, ask what is making them upset.
- If you need to do something, explain it before you do it, and make sure they understand what you're going to do.
- Ask for permission before you do something.

Avoid painful reminders of the trauma

- Understand that normal, day-to-day things may remind the person of their loss and trauma. For example, being touched while being showered may remind them of a sexual assault, or a TV program may remind them of their experience of war.
- If the person is distressed or angry, or won't co-operate, ask if they need you to stop what you're doing, or do it in a different way.
- If possible, write down what is upsetting the person in their care plan or tell a supervisor.

"I've been through a lot of things in my life, but leaving my home and all the memories I shared with my partner Henry was the worst. Sometimes I feel so lost and sad. I've been here almost a year but I still miss my house and my life with Henry."



If a person is distressed, help them to calm down

- Speak in a calm voice.
- Reassure the person that they are safe, and you are there to help them.
- Ask them to take some long, slow, breaths.

Help the person to stay connected to others

- Help the person you provide care for to phone, FaceTime or Skype family and friends when regular visits are not possible.
- Encourage them to attend group activities and outings, if available.

Be informed

- If you can, look at a person's care plan before you help them, especially if it's the first time you work with them.

"It's been so hard not to be able to see my family during the lockdown. It reminded me of when I was a boy during the Second World War – we were in hiding and couldn't go out. They made sure I could phone my family regularly. That made everything so much better."

Remember to look after yourself

Caring for someone with trauma can affect you over time. If you have a difficult day or are upset by an experience with a person you are caring for, talk to a colleague or supervisor you trust.

Getting help for residents affected by trauma, loss and grief

It's never too late for a person to get help. Counselling and medication can help. Changes in a person's behaviour, communication or mood are signs that something might be wrong. It is important that you talk to your manager, a GP or geriatrician on staff if you notice that the person you are caring for is distressed often, or for more than a week or two following a recent trauma.

Useful resources and services

Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement
www.aged.grief.org.au

Healing Foundation
www.healingfoundation.org.au

LGBTIQ+ Health Australia
www.lgbtiqhealth.org.au

Alliance for Forgotten Australians
www.forgottenaustralians.org.au

Care Leavers Australasia
www.clan.org.au