

INFORMATION FOR AGED CARE WORKERS

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

**Phoenix**
A U S T R A L I A

Many older Australians have experienced trauma, grief and loss in their life. Knowing how trauma affects people will help you to understand their needs and behaviours. You can then help them to feel safe and get the support that they need.

Common traumatic events

Older people can be affected by events that happened earlier in their life, or more recently, for example:

- a serious accident
- a fire, flood, earthquake
- being a refugee from war or civil unrest
- experiencing severe illness or the sudden loss of someone close to them during the COVID-19 pandemic
- sexual or physical assault
- emotional abuse.

"There was a program about foster care on the TV and James became agitated and tense. He told me it brought back bad memories. I knew that he'd had a bad childhood but I was surprised how much it still affected him"

Grief and ageing

Many people think of grief as something that happens after the death of someone close to them. Traumatic events and many of the changes that happen with age can also lead to a sense of loss and grief. Common losses experienced by older people include:

- Having to rely on the help of others. Some people may feel they have lost their independence and even their dignity.
- Poor health may mean a person can't do activities they once enjoyed, like exercising or looking after grandchildren. Some people may feel they have lost their sense of purpose.
- Moving into an aged care home can mean losing usual routines, losing touch with friends or pets. This can lead to sadness and grief.

Getting help for older people affected by trauma, loss and grief

Look out for the signs of trauma, loss and grief in the people you are caring for.

Physical changes – not sleeping well, not eating, regular headaches, stomach upsets

Feeling down – less interested in activities, spending more time alone, tearful

Feeling tense and on edge – restless, anxious, irritable

Problems remembering – finding it hard to concentrate and forgetting things

Difficulty managing feelings – sudden emotional outbursts, physical or verbal aggression

Upset by memories – strong reaction when something reminds them of a loss or a trauma, bad dreams, refusing to talk about someone they lost.

It's never too late for a person to get help. Counselling and medication can help.

It is important that you talk to a manager, a GP or geriatrician on staff if you notice that the person you are caring for is experiencing any of the problems described above for more than a week or two.

"Molly was being so irritable and difficult, and I couldn't understand why. Then I remembered that she had a bad fall last month that gave her quite a scare, and she is still feeling upset. I let the doctor know that maybe she needs someone to talk to about it."

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.



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