

Transitioning to Aged Care: Mediating the Losses

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A defining moment in a person's life is the transition to residential aged care, and a particularly challenging time for individuals and their families/loved ones is the lead up to the decision to accept a permanent placement in residential aged care.

The experience of loss can be profound for a person considering residential care. The daunting prospect of relinquishing one's own home, possessions, garden, neighbours, routine, community, pet, independence, sense of self and all that is familiar is difficult enough. Added to this traumatic event is the fact that consideration of aged care is often precipitated by emergent health concerns, unexpected diagnoses, a hospital admission and possibly a family bereavement.

These multiple losses can be overwhelming for any individual and yet the requirements of the health and aged care systems, and increasingly complex legal and financial considerations which surround the decision about care options, often result in the individual's sense of loss and grief not being acknowledged, recognised or validated.

Families and loved ones are often launched into an unfamiliar world of aged and community care which requires substantial research; endless list making; liaison and advocacy with health professionals; discussion with financial advisors and solicitors; and navigating multiple bureaucracies, including Centrelink. This process can be enormously stressful for families/loved ones and may occur in the context of their own experience of: loss and grief, carer stress, physical and psychological exhaustion, and complex family dynamics.

Of course there is the all-important choice of an aged care facility by the individual and family/loved ones. This can involve emotionally charged visits to different facilities to assess how well they meet pre-determined needs and expectations, and the inevitable questions and anguish about waiting lists. This search for a care facility often happens within a short space of time to meet hospital discharge requirements, perhaps with the assistance of an aged care placement agent, and then begins the process of waiting!

Impact

The common theme for individuals and families considering and experiencing transition to residential aged care is the sense of profound loss and grief, and yet often there is no time, inclination or opportunity to recognise or express this grief.

Importantly, each individual's experience of loss is unique, informed by their own personal, health and family circumstances, their life experience, expectations of self and others, and their perceived role in the decision making process.

This uniqueness creates different expressions of grief and stress within families, and it is here that difficulties and/or conflict can emerge and grow – to varying degrees and with a range of consequences.

Where concerns, difficulties and/or conflict arises in the context of a person's transition to residential aged care, or changing elder care circumstances, please consider the following:

- We each perceive our loved one's transition to care according to our own life experience and our own unique relationship with them;
- Each individual will experience and express loss, grief and transition differently, at different times and to varying degrees and intensity – there are no 'shoulds' or 'musts' around how we experience grief;
- The experience of loss and grief can elicit a range of behavioural, psychological and/or physical symptoms which can be 'out of character' and impact on how we communicate with each other – taking this personally is unhelpful and can create and/or exacerbate interpersonal conflict at a time when working together can be most constructive.
- Naming the multiple stresses and losses surrounding transition to care, and speaking openly about them with our loved ones, where possible, can defuse tension and start a more helpful conversation;
- The sheer exhaustion of ongoing elder care can trigger symptoms of grief and loss which can easily be misinterpreted – the impact of ongoing elder care on a person's health and wellbeing cannot be underestimated;
- We all have different expectations of community and aged care – focussing on what is best for our loved one can be a unifying topic of conversation; and
- Any essence of conflict or family disagreement can exacerbate the experience of profound grief and loss for the person transitioning to aged care, and has the potential to seriously affect their health and wellbeing.

Finally, we cannot influence how others experience loss and grief associated with the transition to aged care. We can recognise this as a defining moment for each member of a family and consider how we can offer support and understanding, as far as we are able.

Assistance and Support

Individuals and families experiencing the challenges of transition to care may benefit from support or assistance in the form of counselling, education, facilitated conversations or elder mediation.

Please also remember that providing care and support to others through the transition to care process requires a focus on our own health and wellbeing - to sustain ourselves and others.

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