

BEREAVEMENT IN OLD AGE

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Aged persons have to face many losses

From early childhood on all human beings have to learn to cope with deprivations. For people well advanced in years the losses increase enormously. Those of health and mobility, of loved ones and social standing, familiar surroundings and the loss of autonomy.

The last age in life is characterized by loss of

- > youth
- > health
- > strengths and power
- > mobility
- > autonomy
- > loved ones
- > familiar surroundings
- > social standing
- > orientation, logical thinking, and memory – at least for some of us



The loss of autonomy

"Above all, I don't want to be a burden to others" (Pleschberger 2005)

"If you have always been a person, who was never too lazy for anything..." (Heimerl/Berlach-Pobitzer 2002)

Basic criteria for self-monitoring the "culture of mourning" in institutions caring for the elderly

- > Do we, as an organisation, feel responsible for accompanying people in their mourning?
- > How does our management perceive the obligation to accompany life and suffering through to the end?
- > What value does our management place on accompanying mourning in the elderly?
- > What value do we place on accompanying mourning in our daily lives?
- > What kind of support do we provide roommates and family members during and after the death of a loved one?
- > How do we support and accompany staff members in dealing with suffering, dying, death and bereavement?
- > How are relatives prepared for and supported in their struggle of dealing with senile dementia?
- > How is grieving dealt with in the standards of institutions and services?
- > Does management tend to the financial side of accompanying through life and grieving?
- > How does this affect the employees with regards to work and time schedules? How does it affect the accounting method?
- > According to what criteria are co-workers assigned particular bereavement cases?

Methods

It can be observed, that bereavement in old age is not a sufficient focus neither in the professional discussion nor in research. In transdisciplinary cooperation this paper analyzes both professional experience and results of qualitative research. The paper identifies major causes for losses in very old age. Bereavement in old age is defined as an important subject for future research and for education in Palliative Care. The reflection process concludes with recommendations for organizational culture and bereavement.

The loss of orientation, logical thinking, and memory



The growing rate of mental and physical decline increases the fear of further losses and fear of the future. If the aged person is stricken by dementia, he or she suffers even more: as their disease advances they become completely defenseless. The aged persons themselves are often not able to gather the strength to demand respect or to ask for help. If they do, they are frequently not understood and/or not taken seriously.

Conclusion

Accompanying people in old age entails accompanying them in their mourning and this begins well before death. This requires caretakers to adopt a "culture of living" that makes every period in our life a worthwhile and valued experience and to show that even times of chronic disease, handicaps, weakness and dementia can be cherished.

Human compassion and the special skills of co-workers accompanying a person through deprivation are essential. But neither is sufficient to provide for a proper "culture of mourning"; not in retirement facilities, or hospitals, or even homes.

A culture of mourning has to be organised and introduced through management with the goal of respecting each individual's way of coping with sorrow – including the legitimate aspects of "not now", "not like this", "not with you", and "too much". It is essential to know that a culture of mourning must include the elderly as well as the care givers.

Introducing a culture of mourning to institutions that take care of the elderly is a formidable task. In addition to training standards, we need "application standards" for the accompaniment through life, death and mourning.

Personnel training and organisational development must go hand in hand. The abilities of co-workers should synchronise with the facilities of an institution to allow for a mutually committed "accompaniment through mourning".



The loss of loved ones

"The only place where I can meet with loved ones is the cemetery."

"There is no one left to ask: 'Do you still remember?'"

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