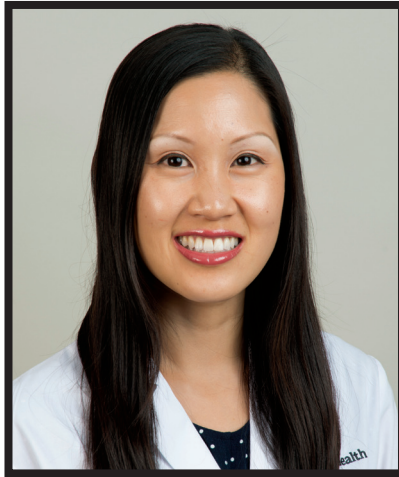


Father's Passing Leaves Mother Sad and Withdrawn



ASK THE DOCTORS

by Elizabeth Ko, M.D., and Eve Glazier, M.D.

DEAR DOCTOR: My father passed away six months ago, and ever since, my elderly mother has withdrawn from all social activity. I can't help wondering if this poses a problem for her mental health.

DEAR READER: The loss of a loved one is a heavy burden for anyone to bear. For an elderly person, particularly a surviving spouse, it can be even more difficult. Elderly women and men are already dealing with challenges such as declining health, loss of independence and the shrinking of their longtime social circles. When faced with the loss of their life partner, the overwhelming grief can cause them to retreat.

Your concern for your mother is well-founded. Research shows that social isolation poses a real threat not just to her cognitive function, but to her physical health as well.

Elderly people who are socially withdrawn are at greater risk of long-term illness, high blood pressure, heart disease, dementia, losing their ability

to walk and stay mobile, and of serious depression. Grief can suppress the immune system, making the elderly even more vulnerable.

Studies reveal that elderly men and women who do not engage with other people die at a significantly higher rate than those who remain socially connected. This is a particularly troubling statistic as the number of senior citizens who live alone is on the rise.

Fortunately, there are steps you can take to help:

-- Research shows that grief counseling can help surviving spouses manage their sense of loss. Encourage your mother so see a counselor, or find a support group that she can join.

-- Something as simple as making transportation easily available can help isolated seniors break free of their bubble.

-- If your mother has connections to a church or other spiritual community, reviving those ties can be helpful at this time.

-- Gathering family members at your mother's home for a meal or a movie can brighten her day. Make it a weekly or monthly habit if you can.

-- For seniors who are strong enough, volunteer work, particularly with young people, gives them a meaningful activity that often has a positive effect.

-- Encourage your mother to establish a new daily routine. A sense of stability can help life to feel normal again.

You may be so concerned about your mother's pain that you are shielding her from your own. Don't be afraid to let her see the sorrow you feel about your father's passing. Grieving together -- sharing memories, telling stories, simply stating how you feel -- can bring you closer and help her to feel ready to join the world again.

** ** *

(Eve Glazier, M.D., MBA, is an internist and assistant professor of medicine at UCLA Health. Elizabeth Ko, M.D., is an internist and primary care physician at UCLA Health.)