

Catholic Caregivers

'Caregiving is pro-life!'

Helping Your Loved One Deal with Losses

It's good to keep in mind that your loved one may be feeling a tremendous sense of loss -- in so many areas. The process of aging means letting go bit by bit. It's losing many things and being forced to accept the fact that a lot -- if not most -- will never be replaced. Yes, life is filled with losses, but we can experience loss more intensely in later life.

Here are three examples:

A tooth: If I'm 5 years old and my front tooth starts to wiggle, I can hardly wait to show everyone. This proves I'm on my way to getting rid of my baby teeth and getting "big kid" teeth. If I'm elderly, it's bad news if my tooth begins to wiggle, if it aches, if my gums become inflamed. Where is it leading? To expensive and painful dental work? To dentures? To a change in my diet, to soft, boiled, mushy food? Maybe it would be best just to ignore it. Maybe the pain will go away.

*Avoid minimizing both what is gone
and the impact the loss has
on your loved one.*

A set of keys: If I'm 25 and I lose my keys, I mutter and fuss and fume because I might be late for work. It's a minor inconvenience. If I'm a senior and I misplace my keys, I can't help worrying that I'm exhibiting an early stage of Alzheimer's. Isn't this how it starts?

A friend: If I'm 45 and I lose a friend it's probably because one of us has moved away. I feel sad and miss spending time with him or her but we can still chat on the phone, send each other e-mails, and get together every few years. If I'm old and lose a friend, it will be because that person has died. That's the end of our friendship. I have lost something that was irreplaceable. And it hurts so much.

As any human body ages, there are adjustments that have to be made. When I'm young and strong, I can go mountain climbing. As I get older, I have to limit myself to hiking. Then walks through the park. Then walks around the neighborhood. Finally, it may be that simply leaving the house takes more

energy and strength than I have. Step by step, I have told myself, "That's all right. I can still . . ." But what now? What can I do if I can't climb a flight of stairs? If I can't cross a room by myself? If I can't get out of bed?

In my heart, I still want to be climbing that mountain.

As a caregiver, you're helping your loved one cope with a succession of losses. Now your father may think, *Here is my child trying to tactfully explain to me that I should wear . . . diapers! That's what they are. They may have a different name, but that's what they are.*

Or A hearing aid! I don't need a hearing aid. If young people today would just quit mumbling and speak up.

Realize, for example, that as Mom ages and becomes unable to perform the everyday tasks she used to love, she may feel she is losing a part of her identity. Your mother is no longer the "super housekeeper" with a spotless home. Her yard is no longer the prettiest one on the block. She can no longer bring her famous scalloped potatoes to family gatherings. And if she isn't that great housekeeper, gardener, or cook, what is she? Who is she?

At the same time, even with the absolute best of intentions, a caregiver may seem to be taking over. Being downright pushy -- or so it seems. "You think it's not safe for me to drive anymore? Just who do you think it was who taught you?" "You think I need help writing checks? Why, I was a vice president in one of the largest corporations in the state!"

They make me so mad sometimes, a care-receiver may think, but what if I don't go along with them? Will they put me in a nursing home? That may be the farthest thing from your mind but you're dealing with emotions, and emotions can be based on misconceptions.

How can you help your loved one who is dealing with a loss?

- Acknowledge the loss.
- Avoid minimizing both what is gone and the impact the loss has on your loved one.
- Allow your loved one to grieve over that loss in his or her own way. □