

# Helping Older Adults Cope with Loss

Information adapted from IDEA Health & Fitness Inc. 2011 <http://www.ideafit.com/fitness-library/helping-older-adults-cope-with-loss>

Working with a group of older adults offers many unique challenges and innumerable rewards. Older adults face losses of many kinds and are often dealing with emotional issues that require your involvement. It is quite common, for example, to have a class member who is caring for an ailing spouse or grieving over the recent death of a loved one. Participants may also be struggling with the loss of their own physical capabilities and good health.

As an individual working with older adults, you may find it useful to establish some basic guidelines for helping these participants/clients. Mostly, you can rely on simple common sense, courtesy, good manners and your instincts as a caring and sensitive human being. However, sometimes your heart will tell you to go in one direction while your actions as a professional will need to take a different path.

## **Create a Low-Key Welcome**

Tempting as it may be to offer a big “welcome back” to a longtime participant returning after an illness, it is generally a better strategy to keep the event low-key. Your client may feel self-conscious about his appearance or physical limitations and unsure of his abilities. Make time before class to speak with him privately, so you can make a thoughtful assessment and offer appropriate modifications. Be sure he feels comfortable with any adaptations you suggest. Make it clear that taking the program at a slower pace is okay. If he would prefer to be out of the spotlight, place him at the back or side of the room where he will not feel embarrassed about stopping or working at a lower level. Always check in after class to answer any questions and give additional encouragement.

Remember: Never go beyond your scope of expertise. Don’t offer medical advice, psychological counsel or religious guidance. When a participant returns after illness or surgery, refer him to a medically supervised program or a more appropriate class if necessary. When in doubt about a returnee’s capabilities—physical or emotional—always suggest that he check with his physician.

## **Transition Following a Death**

Sometimes a participant will be absent for an extended period, have no close friends in class and return looking as if she has had a difficult time. If she doesn’t volunteer information, don’t pry. An open-ended statement like “Welcome back! I haven’t seen you in a while. I hope everything is okay” may help your participant open up. Let her know that you are available to talk. However, also bear in mind that sometimes the best information comes when you simply sit back and observe.

For the individual who is rejoining the class after the death of a spouse, participating in your program represents a return to normalcy. It is important to make the transition back to class as smooth as possible; returning to a familiar routine can be an important step in the healing process. Your client may be struggling with the feeling that physical activity class is a frivolous activity in light of her grief. Assure her that maintaining her fitness level—

especially during a stressful time—will help her stay healthy and cope more effectively with her loss. An enjoyable and successful experience may allow that individual to say, “I can go on. I have control. I’ll be okay.”

### **Appropriate Class Interactions**

Creating a warm and supportive feeling in class will go a long way toward helping returning participants feel comfortable. The first step in fostering a sense of inclusion in your class is to address everyone by name. A quick and easy way to learn names is to paste a small picture of each class member on his or her emergency contact card. By using names frequently, you will encourage others to do so as well, creating a friendly atmosphere. Addressing a returnee by name—and remembering what his limitations are—will help you not only tailor a better program for him but also create a personal connection. This connection will help him feel that you are available should he want to discuss an emotional problem.

At this stage in life, a lot of older adults have endured losses. As an empathetic group, they know how to comfort and care for each other. I’ve seen many people who welcome the warmth and support of a class when they return after a period of mourning. If you are informed of a loss and choose to announce it to the class as a whole, wait until the end of the session. Always try to avoid bringing the mood down at the beginning of class. It is difficult to override a heavy, sad atmosphere. Start promptly and keep the mood light and energetic, allowing time for interaction at the end of class.

When dealing with a returning individual, there are other matters to consider as well. The question of physical contact arises; is it appropriate to hug everyone who is mourning a loss? Body language usually holds the answer, so take your cue from the individual. Just remember that some people might be uncomfortable with physical contact. If *you* aren’t a physically demonstrative person, don’t feel pressured to act in a way that is not true to your own style. A warm smile and some kind, sympathetic and encouraging words may be a better choice. Always be genuine.

Another question might be whether or not to send a card or make a call. Take your cue from the individual’s friends. They are a direct source of information and will help you decide on your course of action. Sending a sympathy card doesn’t have to be an automatic response. Send cards only to those you feel will welcome them. A personal note is always appreciated, and something as simple as “I miss seeing you and look forward to your return to class,” goes a long way. Call if you feel close ties to the person. If other participants request a phone number or an address, comply only if you first get permission from the bereaved individual.

### **Extend Your Care**

Often a class member is the sole caretaker of a terminally ill spouse. A participant in this situation needs extra encouragement and understanding. She may frequently come in late or have to leave early for medical appointments. Reduce this person’s stress levels by letting her know it’s okay to be flexible and by providing the opportunity to make up missed classes if possible.

Sometimes with the demands of caring for a sick spouse comes the neglect of one’s own good nutrition habits. It can be helpful to remind your client to be aware of her own needs and adhere to a well-balanced diet. During sessions in which you know there are individuals with heightened emotional needs, try to add extra stretches and

breathing exercises to the regular workout. Explore stress reduction techniques and add them to your routine. If necessary, seek out workshops that cover additional body-mind methods to expand your repertoire.

It is easy to overlook the role that music plays when you are working with a grieving individual. However, music can make a powerful impact. A piece that the participant considers "our song," or a tune that brings back a vivid memory, can easily trigger an emotional response. Of course you can never anticipate every reaction. However, you can avoid using overly sentimental songs when you know that someone has returned after a particularly hard loss. Bring several selections so that you can substitute a lighter choice if necessary.

As a teacher and a caring human being, you will see many needy students pass through your life and you will have the opportunity to reach them in a very real and rewarding way. Many will become treasured, longtime friends. It is possible that you may experience the death of one of your students, an event that could touch you deeply. Always acknowledge your own grief; take time to care for yourself. Restore your strength and spirit so that you can continue your important work of helping others.

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