

Most deaths in the developed world now occur in old age. It follows that this is the time at which people most frequently suffer bereavement, and many of those who seek help from organisations for the bereaved are in this age group.

Despite this, much of the research on bereavement carried out in the past focused on younger bereaved people, or made no distinction between younger and older members of the populations considered. More recently this omission has been rectified by a number of excellent studies including those reported in Lund's book, *Older Bereaved Spouses* (London, UK: Hemisphere, 1989). Although this points out that 'The overall impact of bereavement on the physical and mental health of many older spouses is not as devastating as expected', several studies reveal that 10–17% of older spouses will develop clinical levels of depression during the first year. There is also evidence that elderly people who become depressed often remain depressed for longer than younger bereaved people. As most married women will one day be widows, this represents a considerable burden.

In this issue we publish a review of the field by two pioneers, Miriam and Stanley Moss, with papers by Steve Scrutton, who works in a residential home, and Judy Clark, a warden of sheltered housing. Between them, they provide a keen insight into the special problems of this age group and indicate the help needed.

Colin Murray Parkes, UK

# The impact of family deaths on older people



Miriam Moss

**Miriam Moss, MA**

Senior Research Sociologist

Philadelphia Geriatric Center, Polisher Research Institute, Philadelphia, USA



Sidney Moss

**Sidney Moss, ACSW**

Research Analyst

Most clinical and research literature on bereavement examines family deaths, but there is a paucity of concern about the impact of these losses on old people. Furthermore, professional literature on old age tends to all but ignore death. We suggest that the lack of interface between gerontology and thanatology is a reflection of the devaluation of the elderly and their grief. This offers a challenge to the counsellors and caregivers of older people.

## GENERAL THEMES

Although efforts to understand bereavement in old age have focused on widowhood, here we examine deaths of other family members which should not be overlooked. When long-term bonds have been significant in life, the impact of the death must also be significant.

Basic to the understanding of bereavement of older men and women is the fact that they are a heterogeneous group. There tend to be considerable individual differences in the expression of emotional upset, in the way that people think about the death, and in the impact of the loss on their day-to-day behaviour. Several general themes have emerged, however, which are of central concern to many older people. Two have particular relevance to counsellors who may work with elderly bereaved people:

- bereavement in the elderly occurs within the context of multiple and sequential losses
- an old person's grief is often disenfranchised.

## EDITOR'S NOTE

Ken Doka's book, *Disenfranchised Grief*<sup>1</sup>, drew our attention to the fact that there are many life situations in which grief is ignored or its implications minimised. In this paper two noted American gerontologists argue that this is often the case in old age, a time when losses of many kinds are to be expected.

## Multiple losses in old age

Old age is a time of many losses. In addition to the death of a spouse, elderly persons are often confronted by the death of age peers (eg siblings) as well as by kin from older and younger generations (parents and children). Also, many other losses potentially occur in old age: decline of physical health and mobility; loss of independence; reduced income; separation from familiar home or community surroundings; and a shrinking social network. Thus there may be a diminution of resources for meeting the stress of family bereavement.

Multiple, sequential deaths often occur in families. It may be that mas-