

# Loss in the Elderly

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The purpose of this study is to seek the nursing intervention for the elderly people's positive lives by investigating the causes for their loss and its meanings. The method of this research derives from a phenomenological tool as a qualitative research design.

The data collection had been performed from February, 2001 until August, 2001 through systematic interviews and participatory observations of six elderly people (4 elderly women and 2 elderly men) residing in downtown Seoul. It took one and a half hour for each interview arranged five times. The analysis of this research is based upon Giorgi method and the research results on the causes for elderly people's sense of loss and its meaning are as follows.

- 1) bitter disappointment of family members : unfaithful children, husband's infidelity, conflict with daughter-in-law, economic hardships.
- 2) bereavement : loss of spouse or children, a sense of one's own mortality.
- 3) regret for the past : sorrowful things, unfair treatment, a sense of resentment, a sense of futility, a feeling of helplessness, despair, resignation.
- 4) unpleasant memories of others : hurt of self-esteem, hostile feelings aroused by betrayal or distrust.
- 5) grief of lost youth : loss of health, hard married life, unlucky fate.
- 6) sense of another superable life : regret, awareness, maturity through suffering.

As a person ages, the number of deaths of close friends and family members usually increases. The occurrence of such multiple losses can cause the elderly to become overwhelmed by the events. Care givers need to be sensitive to these losses and need to be aware that the elderly can experience an overload of grief. Counselling can often be useful in helping them to come to terms with such multiple losses.

**Key Words:** The Elderly; Loss

## INTRODUCTION

As the population grows older, sense of loss in the elderly is becoming a more widespread problem. The elderly person often mistakes his or her sense of loss for dementia or the normal aging process. Many elderly people and their families even don't recognize the symptoms of sense of loss, and don't know how it can be treated. The elderly people often suffer many kinds of

losses, such as bereavements of family members or close friends, the possible loss of their health or the loss of their jobs through retirements (Brunner & Suddarth, 1993; Yoon, 1985).

Contrary to young people, the elderly usually suffer from sense of loss more severely which is caused by their alienation, depression, sorrow, desperation and some kind of guiltiness. The sense of loss is one of inevitable experiences the elderly people should undergo, which is closely related to their sense of death (Ahn, 1997;

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Davidhizar & Shearer, 1994). Their reactions to the loss of sense mainly assume negative aspects, and exceptionally take on positive one associated with mental maturity through suffering (Davidhizar & Shearer, 1994; Moloney, 1995).

The old age is the crisis because of the loss of health, reliance, income, social position, role, worth and social participation. Especially the old is experienced the powerlessness and frustration due to the loss of social role (Chang, 1981; Koag, 1993).

The death is regarded the ultimate loss. The grief according to the loss of the parents, life-partner, brothers and sisters which is incurred the insomnia, social withdrawal, difficulty of concentration is resulted in the depression and suicide (Clyton, 1990; Parkes, 1972).

So, the appropriate nursing interventions recovering to the healthy life quickly through examining and confirming the pattern that the old cope with and adapt to the loss.

But till now, the studies of the loss in the elderly are rarely attained in the nursing science. And so, the purpose of this study is to seek the nursing intervention for the elderly people's healthy lives by investigating the causes for their senses of loss and its meanings.

## METHODS

The methodology used for this research is based upon the personal interviews and in depth observations .

### 1. Design of the study

Sense of loss among the elderly is widespread. Most often it occurs in the context of the multiple physical psychosocial problems that beset this population. Awareness of a variety of nursing interventions for the elderly people's sense of loss is essential. For the purpose of this research, a phenomenological tool as a qualitative research design will be employed.

### 2. Participants and Data collection

The data collection had been performed from February, 2001 until August, 2001 through systematic interviews and participatory observations of six elderly people (4 elderly women & 2 elderly men) residing in downtown Seoul.

They are coherent, consistent, and clear in thought and judgement and understood the purpose of the study and agreed to participation.

Research techniques are in depth interview, observation, journal memorandum and tape recorder is used to prevent omitted material.

It took one and a half hour for each interview arranged five times. The age of participants ranges from 65 to 74 years with an average age of 67 years. Their religions are: Christianity(2), Catholic church(3), Buddhism(1). Their academic careers are: college graduate(1), high school graduate(3), middle school graduate(2).

### 3. Data Analysis

The analysis of this research is based upon Giorgi method to probe into the causes for elderly people's sense of loss and its meaning. To enhance the credibility of research, the contact with several professors of nursing science and Korean literature well versed in qualitative research was made.

Giorgi method is explained as follows :

1) In order to contemplate the statement of the participant, their accountment was read word for word many times without criticism or judgement.

2) To confirm the meaning of some parts of the account where the part was not clear, the meanings ascribed to the participants.

3) The starting and ending unit of the thought process : in other words, countering on the original account of the participants experience, a close examination was made on the unit of meaning though the form of expression or vocabulary is different.

4) In this unit the subject: a potential factor that shows an account of the participant expressed by the participant is closely examined.

5) To materialize the subject, the central meaning that the experience held for the participant was inquired into within the boundaries of the descriptive unit.

6) Combing the central meaning, a circumstantial and structure account was made of the meaning of the living experience grasped from each participant's view point.

7) Combing the circumstantial and structural accounts, a general and structural account was made of the meaning of the living experience grasped from every participant's viewpoint.

### 4. Ethical consideration of participants

Data collection for this research was performed by the personal interviews with the elderly on condition that it will be made only for the purpose of research itself and

will never be released to the public concerning the participants' privacy.

## RESULTS

The research results of the causes for elderly people's sense of loss and its meaning are as follows.

1) bitter disappointment of family members : unfaithful children, husband's infidelity, conflict with daughter-in-law, economic hardships.

2) bereavement : loss of spouse or children, a sense of one's own mortality.

3) regret for the past : sorrowful things, unfair treatment, a sense of resentment, a sense of futility, a feeling of helplessness, despair, resignation.

4) unpleasant memories of others : hurt of self-esteem, hostile feelings aroused by betrayal or distrust.

5) grief of lost youth : loss of health, hard married life, unlucky fate.

6) sense of another superable life : regret, awareness, maturity through suffering.

## DISCUSSION

### 1. Significance of sense of loss in the elderly

1) bitter disappointment of family members: unfaithful children, husband's infidelity, conflict with daughter-in-law, economic hardships.

Though the elderly are living with family members, sometimes they feel lonesome and think their dreams are gone away.

"I thought my son would never do that to me."

"Sons and daughters mean nothing to me. They treat me like a total stranger."

"My husband had an affair with other girls in the past. He got back to me when he was ill."

"He was so cruel to me on the excuse that he was handsome."

"My son is still an apple in my eye. How dare she try to maneuver my son."

"I'm so cold. I wanted to take a hot bath but I hadn't any penny left in my hands."

Park(1997)'s survey on the Korean elderly people's problems to the question of "what was the most painful thing in your life?" shows the concern about the future of their children(19.3%), financial difficulty(14.6%), trouble with spouse(12.3%), regardless of the elderly

people's physical problems.

The participants of this study show that they have the feelings of futility when their dreams and goals are frustrated. And they think these emotional setbacks were caused by the conflicts with their daughter-in-law and their financial difficulties. Consequently, they suffer severe sense of loss in that their feeling of passion and love to other people cannot survive in their heart.

2) bereavement : loss of spouse or children, a sense of one's own mortality.

Death, the biggest loss in life, makes people painful and frustrated. Especially, the death of parents, spouse, children give them permanent feeling of hurt and death is closely related with sense of loss.

"I was dumbfounded when my husband was dead."

"I could do anything if I were given the chance to live with my husband once again."

"I should have taken care of him well, now he has gone and I miss him so much."

"Though he was a trouble maker, I want to take good care of him so much if he were still here now."

"My child was near death when I opened the door. He meant everything to me."

"I made every effort to make him rise in the world and he dumped me, bastard."

"I am left alone, I wish you could take me to the place where you are now soon."

They undergo painful experience though the death of beloved ones, and this is considered as a major loss. The loss of spouse and children makes people live in frustration for the rest of their life(Kim, 1995).

The participants of this study think that the death of their beloved family members is considered as robbery committed by someone. Their death follows fear, waiting for something to happen which shows their broken heart still remain with little changes.

3) regret for the past : sorrowful things, unfair treatment, a sense of resentment, a sense of futility, a feeling of helplessness, despair, resignation.

Elderly people express their feelings of regret, penance for their wrong doings by looking back upon their past.

"I feel like I'm a naked tree. I feel so sad and lonesome."

"I don't eat anything while I'm so sick. I'm afraid I die like this. It's so unfair if I die now"

"He took away all things from me."

“I was so sad when I had to leave the old house. I was supposed to live in that house for life.”

“There is nothing special in life, you live and you die someday, that’s all.”

“I felt hopeless when I found myself I have nothing to help them.”

“No hope, no shoulders to cry on. What am I gonna do?”

“I thought I’m a drop-out in life, no friends, no job, everything was hopeless.”

Davidhizar & Shearer(1994) said that elderly people undergo emotional unrest through alienation, grief, despair, depression and these symptoms lead them to unhealthiness. Lee(1994) revealed that they express they had trouble in human relationship, regret of money and fame they couldn’t get by. The participants of this study showed similar attitude. They made every effort to make their family happy and to live in good condition but nothing with them now. And this feeling leads them to depression, which makes them believe every effort on earth is futile.

4) unpleasant memories of others : hurt of self-esteem, hostile feelings aroused by betrayal or distrust.

“I kept thinking of my high social status in old days. I was indulged in thinking of my old days.”

“Tough reality tore me into pieces. I was afraid bad things might come upon me someday but never expected it so soon.”

“I treated people with care and integrity but they didn’t. They turn back against me”

“It’s really unfair. Bad guys are living better.”

“Can’t judge people from appearances. You never know what’s on their mind.”

Fry(1983) said that elderly people may lapse into psychiatric disorder when they are exposed to loss and alienation from others. This prevents them from adjusting to the new environment. The participants of this study suffering sense of loss show that they can’t sustain normal human relationship on the basis of humanism. It proves that they are living in the world with disbelief and thinking there is nothing in the world to rely on.

5) grief of lost youth : loss of health, hard married life, unlucky fate.

People are inevitably exposed to every kind of losses, and those losses are the main causes of big trouble among elderly people.

“can’t sleep well, and doctor keeps saying, ‘Never mind. Take a good rest at home.’”

“My legs are killing me. Though I hit my legs with a stick, I can’t feel hurt.”

“I’m the most unlucky man in the world. To die? It’s better to die.”

Aging process which is inevitable in human life cycle is closely related with elderly people’s health. This also results in elderly people’s feeling of alienation, sense of loss, depression(Burner & Suddarth, 1993). Park, I. O. said that they are deep in blue when they are in bad health condition, and Noh(1994) said that when they suffer from abnormal grief, they are easily tempted to drug abuse and possible suicidal attempt.

6) sense of another superable life : regret, awareness, maturity through suffering.

“I really wished to treat him well... I thought I would do everything on earth.”

“I don’t know why I did so at that time. Maybe I was not myself. I feel guilty for it.”

“All of a sudden, I realized that I have been in the wrong place in life, it’s a shock for me.”

“To change my goal in life, it needs strong conviction.”

Erikson said that old age is the last stage in life in which they look back upon their past judging their life was a good one or a bad one. If they think it’s good one, their perfection of self has been made, if it’s a bad one they are susceptible to the feelings of depression and alienation(Kim, 1995).

## 2. Implications for Clinical Practice

As a person ages, the number of deaths of close friends and family members usually increases. The occurrence of such multiple losses can cause the elderly to become overwhelmed by the events. In addition to bereavements, the elderly people often suffer many other kinds of losses, such as the loss of their mobility, the possible loss of their health or home or the loss of their job through retirement. Carer givers need to be sensitive to the losses and need to be aware that the elderly can experience an overload of grief. Counselling can often be useful in helping them to come to terms with such multiple losses.

Accordingly, a variety of programs for the elderly to overcome their physiological or psychological crisis caused by their sense of loss should be substantially developed and supported. In order to implement the social

welfare for the elderly people, much special consideration whether on the governmental level or the personal one should be devoted to the elderly people suffering from a sense of loss.

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