

Living Longer Growing Stronger

from the Alaska Commission on Aging

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The mission of the Alaska Commission on Aging is to ensure dignity and independence for Alaska's seniors and to assist them, through programs and services funded by the Commission, to lead useful and meaningful lives.



Alaskan Seniors: Living Longer, Growing Stronger is a monthly publication of the Alaska Commission on Aging (ACoA)

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Executive Director
Jane P. Demmert
P O Box 110209
Juneau, AK 99811-0209
(907) 465-3250
Jane_Demmert
@admin.state.ak.us

Healthy Holidays!



The Alaska Public Health Association held its *Alaska Health Summit 2000* December 4-5 in Anchorage. The Alaska Commission on Aging joined the summit for the first time this year, helping sponsor speaker Wendy Lustbader, MSW (Above). Ms. Lustbader is an Affiliate Associate Professor at the University of Washington's School of Social Work. The author of several books on caregiving and aging, she also works as a Medical Social Worker at Pike Market Clinic in Seattle.

This issue of *Alaskan Seniors: Living Longer, Growing Stronger* focuses on Ms. Lustbader's presentations at the *Alaska Health Summit*.

Loss As an Aspect of Aging

December, with its many joyful celebrations, can be hard when we have experienced loss. The season's focus on happiness, family, friends, and health can bring our personal losses into sharper focus. As we age, we face loss on many different levels. Wendy Lustbader, MSW, spoke on the types of loss that are to be expected as we age, and what we can do when we experience this.

Ms. Lustbader identified the following health issues that can accrue as we age: loss of vision, hearing, memory, and dexterity, arthritis, coronary artery disease, and high blood pressure. Ms. Lustbader also listed obesity at any age, which she calls "a national scandal in America," and warns that it leads to joint pain, diabetes, and heart disease.

All of these issues can lead to problems with mobility, threaten our independence, and most

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Loss As an Aspect of Aging (continued from page 1)

importantly, threaten loss of meaning. Loss of meaning is a mental health aspect that is not often considered, yet it is key to our health. Also, as we age, our loved ones pass away. Grief is a natural response to loss.

It's difficult to assess the difference between grief and depression as we age. In fact, it's almost impossible to distinguish between the two. Assessing the impact of a person's loss is more important than making this distinction.

According to Ms. Lustbader, elders who accrue too many losses at once can become vulnerable to suicide. Nationally, older adults commit suicide more often than any other age group. She noted that older white men who have had a recent loss and own a gun are the most likely to attempt or commit suicide. This may be because they're used to having most of the power in this country. Since most suicides are impulsive, owning a gun gives the means to carry out the suicide.

In Alaska's Native communities, suicide prevention focuses mostly on young men as a high risk group. While this is necessary, it's important to remember to also pay attention to elders who are also vulnerable. This challenge in rural communities is made worse by limited resources. If a community's capacity to care for an individual is no longer adequate, it may become necessary for that person to leave the community to receive care. This can lead to cultural isolation.

Those of us who are caring for aging friends and relatives must be careful not to overprotect them. This can lessen their identity and sense of purpose. As we age, we need to continue our life tasks to the limit of our ability. These tasks give our lives meaning. We must remain connected to all sources of meaning in our lives. Meaning is also found in social connections and in our spirituality. We need to maintain motivation in order to keep from sinking into depression.

Help can come from community resources such as senior centers and health centers, or involvement with church or civic groups. The best help, though, comes from within. The key question to ask ourselves or those we care for is "what used to make my (your) life worth living?" This is a powerful question to ask, as it reveals what motivates us each day, no matter our age, but particularly as we age, when many of the things that used to give our lives meaning (or distract us from that meaning) begin to slip away. Remember that people hold the key to their own healing. Find the key to your healing, and don't judge it when you find it. It could be anything—even looking forward to yet another hectic holiday season!

Losses Associated With Becoming Ill, Disabled, or Homebound

Loss of contact with friends and acquaintances: added dependence on relatives or caregivers for social contact.

Loss of purpose: fewer ways to engage in useful activity or contribute to other people's lives.

Loss of independence in self-care: decreased privacy and control in the activities of daily living.

Loss of mobility: fewer opportunities for exercise and for obtaining a refreshing change of scene.

Loss of sensory pleasures: diminished taste, smell, sight, hearing, or touch.

Loss of patience: a short temper from chronic pain or a tendency to dump frustrations on loved ones.

Loss of out-of-home activities: fewer pleasant distractions or healthy stresses to stimulate interests.

Loss of self-esteem: fewer social roles or chances to affirm one's skills, knowledge, or creativity.

Loss of meaning: fewer ways to construct a life that seems worth living.

From Wendy Lustbader and Nancy R. Hooyman, *Taking Care of Aging Family Members* (New York: The Free Press, 1994). © 1994 by Wendy Lustbader and Nancy Hooyman; © 1986 by The Free Press.

Take Care of the Caregiver!

Wendy Lustbader stressed the connection between our health as we age, and the health of our caregivers. Whether we are in the Pioneer Home, an assisted living home, or being cared for by a friend or relative in our own home, our health and well-being is intertwined with that of our care provider.

It's easy to focus on the emotional and physical needs of the one who receives care, and forget that the nature of their work makes caregivers vulnerable to these same needs. An ill, disabled, or homebound senior may feel isolated, helpless, lonely, or limited in their independence and privacy. Caregivers can also feel all of these things, particularly if they're caring for a loved one in the home. These feelings may be intensified by exhaustion brought on by interrupted sleep schedules and other characteristics of caregiving. This can lead to burnout, depression, and mistakes that can affect the health and safety of the care provider or the one for whom they're caring. Volunteer caregivers (usually caring for their spouse or other family member in the home) often neglect their own health for the sake of their loved one until it's too late. When that caregiver becomes sick or incapacitated, someone new must be found to take his or her place.

Ms. Lustbader recommends that caregivers set goals for themselves that they can look forward to, such as scheduling time off, if possible. It's important that once these goals are set, the promises are kept. Making firm commitments in advance will ensure that they're not put off later because of the difficulty of arranging respite care.

Education and outreach is vital to the health and welfare of caregivers. Proper training enables caregivers to pace themselves, to recognize the symptoms of stress and overwork, and to take steps to compensate for it. They need to know if respite providers are available, and how to contact them. Recognition of caregivers, such as an appreciation dinner or luncheon, is an excellent way to boost morale. However, if you set up a recognition event, make sure to provide adult day care, or it'll defeat the purpose! Individuals might volunteer to provide respite care, or bring in a meal now and then to make things easier for a caregiver. Even an occasional card or note, or a few kind words can help lift their spirits.

It's in each community's best interest to support its caregivers, as Alaska's growing senior population will require an increasing number of quality care providers in the future. A culture that supports and nurtures caregivers will encourage more people to consider the field professionally, and will also help those who are caring for loved ones privately.

The Warning Signs of Stress and Depression

(Note that these warning signs can apply to an ill, disabled, or homebound person OR their caregiver!)

Sleep disturbance: difficulty falling asleep or remaining asleep; waking up early in the morning feeling anxious or irritable; unable to stop worrying or ruminating.

Appetite changes: unusual overeating or loss of appetite; significant weight gain or loss.

Increased medication or alcohol usage: overuse of sleeping pills, painkillers, alcohol, or caffeine.

Mood changes: uncharacteristic short-temperedness, crying or agitation; expressionless face or flat tone of voice; recurrent thoughts of death or suicide.

Physical problems: decreased resistance to illness; delay or neglect of vital physical needs; poor nutrition.

Chronic fatigue: loss of energy; decreased motivation, concentration, and attention; unending sense of tiredness.

Rough handling: marked impatience when giving care; hitting, pushing, or yelling when frustrated or angered; neglecting vital care tasks.

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