



AGING AND LOSS OF INDEPENDENCE

“I can’t do as many things as I used to do, but I’m now learning to enjoy what I can do.”

— Helen, 78 year-old grandmother

Losses occur at every stage in life, particularly in the later years. As we age, we must cope with a variety of setbacks – physical, social, or emotional – that may, over time, affect our ability to function independently, jeopardizing our freedom from relying on others for our needs. The extent to which we accept and adapt to these losses directly affects the quality of life we achieve and maintain.

What Losses Might I Experience?

Physical and Mental Losses

You may become aware of changes in your physical and mental abilities, such as not remembering appointments or having difficulty climbing stairs, opening jars, or walking long distances. Other changes may include:

- Vision problems
- Less control over emotions
- Less physical energy
- Less flexibility
- Hearing problems
- Less ability to move easily
- Memory problems
- Less stamina

Social Loss

Physical losses can gradually limit the ability to participate in social activities – sports, cultural outings, parties, and even dining out. For example:

- A person with a significant hearing loss, even with a hearing aid, might begin to avoid social situations for fear of missing conversation or having to ask others to repeat themselves.
- A person with heart disease suffering from shortness of breath may be unable to continue daily walks with buddies. Over time, less contact with others may lead to fading friendships.

Emotional Loss

Loss of independence can create tremendous frustration, feelings of uselessness, and sadness, due to a sense of loss of control in one's life. For example:

- Some people might have a vision problem that prevents them from driving at night. This might cause them minor inconveniences, but usually does not prevent them from pursuing their usual activities. If the vision impairment worsens and daytime driving becomes dangerous, their independence becomes more threatened. People often feel a loss of control when they are unable to get where they want to go when they want to get there.
- Necessary activities like grocery shopping and medical appointments might seem impossible to accomplish. Being unable to do what used to be ordinary activities can be extremely frustrating.

What Are Some Reactions to Loss of Independence?

When thinking about or beginning to experience loss of independence due to aging, it is common for people to experience complicated feelings such as:

- **Fear.** Some people become frightened by their new vulnerability, wondering how they will manage on their own. Overwhelmed, they may begin to expect close friends and family to be always available for them.
- **Anger.** Others, feeling angry that they can no longer manage on their own, may take their anger out on their loved ones.
- **Guilt.** Still others may feel guilty and refuse needed help from family and friends because they think they will be considered a burden.
- **Confusion.** It is not uncommon for people to feel confused about needing help and long for "what was."

How Am I Adjusting to Loss of Independence?

As losses occur, the need for assistance from others increases. Recognizing your attitude toward relying on others may provide a hint as to how you may adjust to your loss of independence in later years. People vary in their reactions to receiving help. Some are quite comfortable receiving assistance from others, while others are not, for example:

Comfortable with Assistance

- Some people have always enjoyed having others do things for them such as cooking or cleaning the house. Not being able to do these things for themselves because of a health problem does not bother them.
- Some individuals have had to rely on family, friends, or paid caregivers throughout life because of a longstanding health problem or disability. For them, accepting help does not threaten independence. Rather, help may be viewed as a necessary ingredient to achieving a rich and full life.

Uncomfortable with Assistance

- Some older adults have gotten great pleasure from caring for others but are not comfortable receiving help themselves.
- There are still others who have always strongly preferred to manage without help whenever possible. For these people, accepting assistance, particularly from someone outside their family, is difficult.

Even the most independent among us have relied on others at some point during our adult lives. Sometimes help comes in the form of a job reference, a financial loan, or moral support. As you grow older your attitudes toward accepting help may change, especially when you experience changes in your health or social life. Those who adapt to accepting help can devote more time to building new and positive experiences.

How Can I Cope with My Loss of Independence?

Be Patient. Losses are inevitable especially as you age. Acknowledge your losses and how these are affecting your life now.

Practice Self Acceptance. Recognize that losing independence is a common experience as people age, and not a sign of personal failure. It is normal and natural.

Recognize Your Feelings. Allow yourself to feel sad and frustrated at times without putting yourself down for not being able to do what you used to do.

Remain Open. Trusted family and friends might offer suggestions about things you could try to make your life easier. Think about and discuss these options rather than closing your mind to the possibilities.

Pursue New Experiences. Develop new friendships, interests, hobbies, and other activities that you physically can do.

Stay Connected. Continue to maintain relationships with loving and caring friends and family.

Volunteer. Spend time helping and teaching people. Volunteering keeps you intellectually and socially stimulated. It makes you feel useful and provides you with new social networks.

Determine if Assistance is Needed. It is okay to deal with your loss of independence on your own, but you may also want to seek help and support from others. In deciding if you need more help, consider the following:

- Is your quality of life diminishing?
- Is your personal level of frustration becoming unmanageable?
- Are people you trust telling you to seek help?

Seek Help. Assistance that is frequently needed as people develop physical and mental health problems includes a range of services, such as quality medical and mental health care, shopping, housekeeping, cooking, transportation assistance, managing finances, and monitoring medications. Paying for these new services can be expensive and financially draining. People cope with this reality in different ways:

- Some people are strongly opposed to paying for services thinking that these expenses will quickly eat away at hard earned savings, leaving them financially vulnerable. Others worry that they will not be able to leave their children enough inheritance if they purchase services for themselves.
- Some people refuse to accept free services, thinking this is a sign of weakness or failure. Sometimes, these people suffer needlessly.
- Others think that loved ones ought to provide the assistance, believing it is shameful if strangers assist them. Sometimes this creates tension among family members.
- Some get the services they need, recognizing that, without such help, their quality of life would be affected.

Accept Help. Allow yourself to find the balance between accepting help and living as independently as possible. Keep in mind that others may feel good about helping you.

Where to Get Help

National Resources

Area Agencies on Aging (AAA). These agencies offer programs across the country for older adults whether they are frail and homebound or healthy and independent. To find Area Agencies on Aging, call the toll-free Eldercare Locator at 1-800-677-1116.

Web site: www.n4a.org

New York City Resources

The New York City Department for the Aging. This agency provides advocacy, education, and coordination of services for older New Yorkers. In New York City, call 311 for more information on senior services or programs in your area. Phone: 1-212-442-1000.

Web site: www.nyc.gov/html/dfta/home.html

Senior Employment Services. The New York City Department for the Aging's Senior Employment Services (SES) assists New York City residents 55 years of age and older who are seeking work opportunities. Phone: 1-212-442-1353.

Foster Grandparent Program. This volunteer program from the New York City Department for the Aging offers seniors age 60 and older a paid non-taxable stipend to serve as mentors, tutors, and caregivers for children and youth with special needs. Phone: 1-212-442-3117.

DOROT's University Without Walls. This educational program uses telephone conference calls to reach individuals throughout the New York Metropolitan area, New Jersey, and Florida, bringing them together into one vibrant community. Phone: 1-212-769-2850 or 1-877-819-9147.

Web site: www.dorotusa.org

Greenberg Academy for Successful Aging. This program develops and implements health education programs – workshops, lectures, and exercise classes – aimed at the interests and needs of people age 60 and over. For more information, contact the Health and Wellness Coordinator.

Phone: 1-212-606-1057. Web site: Escota.info/memberdirect.html

This resource provides brief, general information about this health care topic. It does not take the place of specific instructions you receive from your health care providers. For answers to other questions consult your physician or other health care provider.

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