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Occupational Responses of Older Adults Following Partner Loss

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Introduction

- Of individuals ages 70 and older, 17% of men and 48% of women were identified as widows or widowers (Kreider & Ellis, 2011).
- Spousal loss can impede one's ability to age in place due to factors such as difficulty with home and financial maintenance (Lindquist et al., 2016).
- Understanding occupational changes that occur in response to spousal loss may help health professionals facilitate successful aging in place.

References: Kreider, R. M. & Ellis, R. (2011). *Number, timing, and duration of marriages and divorces: 2009*. [Data file]. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/p70-125.pdf>; Lindquist, L. A., Ramirez-Zohfeld, V., Sunkara, P., Forcucci, C., Campbell, D., Mitzen, P., & Cameron, K. A. (2016). Advanced life events (ALEs) that impede aging-in-place among seniors. *Archives of Gerontology and Geriatrics*, 64, 90-95.

Purpose of Study

To explore the occupational and other associated responses of older adults following partner loss.

Methods

Design: Qualitative phenomenological research

Participants:

- Four women, four men
- Ages 72 to 85
- Time since partner loss: 1 year to 6 years
- Caucasian; English-speaking
- Residing in the community in Marin County
- Recruited through the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at Dominican University of California

Data Collection & Analysis: Qualitative data was gathered using semi-structured interviews, which were audio recorded and transcribed. An occupation-focused activities guide was provided as a reference to the participants during the interviews. Common themes were identified using constant comparison analysis.

Occupational Responses

Peers/Friends Increased single friends, reconnected with past friends, decreased partner's friends

Community Participation Continuing education, religious services, community groups, exercise programs

Family Increased support from family members and/or strained relationships with children

Caregiving Transitioned from caring for partner to caring for self

Activities of Daily Living **Maintained:** Bathing, personal hygiene, dressing, toileting, functional mobility, etc.

Financial Management Assumed partner's responsibilities and/or sought financial management assistance

Household Management Assumed partner's responsibilities and/or hired outside help

Meal Preparation Prepared own meals, meal delivery services, restaurant dining

Leisure **Maintained:** Sports, social outings, reading, travel, entertaining at home

Intrinsic Responses

Autonomy "I'm totally free. I don't have anyone else to worry about or take care of. I guess that's a positive."

"Learning to say 'I' not 'we'."

Intra-Transition

Filling in Time "You just stay active as much as you can." "...as a single person, with extra time on [my] hands."

Discussion

- Occupations commonly impacted by partner loss include: social participation, caregiving, financial and household management, meal preparation, and leisure.
- The Transactional Model of Partner Loss highlights the findings of the study: following partner loss, occupational and intrinsic responses interact in a transactional manner.
- Participants demonstrated an effective model of adapting to the occupational responses and successfully aged in place.

Implications for OT Practice

- Occupational therapists (OTs) may address these areas of occupations when working with this population.
- OTs can use multiple intervention approaches when working with older adults to assist in adapting to changes in daily life following partner loss.

Intervention	Examples of OT Intervention
Establish	Establish a new routine to fill in time
Maintain	Maintain independence in ADLs (i.e. self care)
Adapt/Modify	Modify financial management routine
Prevent	Prevent social isolation

Transactional Model of Partner Loss



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