

Grief, Loss, Older People and Mental Health: An interdisciplinary response

Carmen is a 74 year old woman (DOB 1945) who lives in Penola, a small regional town in South Australia with her beloved golden retriever, Shelby.

Her husband of 39 years, Robert, died suddenly from a massive heart attack 10 years ago.

Robert and Carmen made “*a great team*”. They met at university in Adelaide where Robert was studying business management and Carmen was studying teaching. As soon as Robert graduated, they moved to Penola and established a newsagency incorporating the local Post Office which he ran until his sudden and untimely death. Carmen never worked as a teacher but instead worked at the business as Robert’s “*deputy, personal secretary, book keeper, human resources manager, shop front calmer downer, gopher and better half*”. The business was a successful one, popular with and well patronised by locals, due in no small part to Robert’s larger-than-life personality. People were naturally drawn to Robert who was social, charismatic and upbeat. By contrast, Carmen wasn’t relaxed in social situations, describing herself as “*private and quiet*”. Supporting Robert to manage their business kept her busy and focused and she enjoyed the role immensely. Now at the “*end of my life*” she reflects, the success of their business is her “*greatest life achievement*”.

Carmen and Robert have three sons aged between 39 and 46 years old. They all went to boarding school and university in Adelaide and ultimately

married and settled there too. There are seven grandchildren in the family.

Robert’s death took everybody by surprise. The business was running when he died and Carmen promptly placed it on the market, not for a moment entertaining the idea of continuing to run it without him. There was much to do during this period. Carmen’s sons were not much help. They had young children as well as demanding wives, leaving Carmen and a core group of staff to do it on their own. Carmen was surprised how, despite her sadness over Robert’s death, she enjoyed this period - the flurry of activity, shared focus, endless negotiations, the physicality of clearing up and clearing out, as well as the pre-cooked meals that generously appeared on her doorstep. As soon as the business sold her trusty staff team promptly returned to their lives: finding new jobs, enjoying new found retirement, their children, their grandchildren, and their hobbies. The business sold faster than expected and for a good price. Carmen was grateful that money was one thing she didn’t need to worry about. But despite the good result, as soon as settlement was negotiated Carmen felt there was a ‘*big hole in my life*’ which she struggled to fill. She was grateful for Shelby’s company, who was still a puppy.

Carmen is in relatively good health for her age. Since moving to Penola she has attended the same GP clinic seeing whichever GP is available, presenting for relatively routine health issues.

Carmen has never smoked and only drinks alcohol in moderation; she has kept her weight stable because *“despite Robert being overweight all of his life, he never liked overweight women”*. In her later years, Carmen’s blood pressure has dropped and she’s also developed mild osteoarthritis in her left hip. Carmen experienced *‘the baby blues’*, as she and Robert called them, after their second and third sons were born. At the time, the GP gave her some pills; she didn’t really take much notice of what they were but they, as well as time and the distraction of their busy business, seemed to help and she didn’t stay sad for long.

It wasn’t until a couple of years after Robert’s death that Carmen realised just how important Robert had been to her identity: he was *“my life, my work, my hobby”*. She misses the *“idea of service and of being needed”* that was such a core part of their life together. She yearns for Robert on a daily basis and her life feels poorer with him no longer in it. Carmen had never realised just how much she’d lost by moving to Penola; she has virtually no relationship with two of her surviving siblings in Adelaide. Her daily walks with Shelby are her only purpose in life and while she feels silly for this she is also grateful.

Carmen feels lost, bereft and very alone, she wishes someone could *“read my mind”* and save her like Robert used to do so well. Her grief feels little different from those first weeks and months without Robert. She finds herself crying at unexpected times, full of regret and sadness.

Carmen used to say how blessed she was but now she feels sorry for herself. She is tired all the time but can’t sleep. The transistor radio is comfort for Carmen at night, after she has watched the reality TV show that she is grateful Robert isn’t here to see her watch. Carmen doesn’t like what her life has become but she doesn’t know how to lift herself up.

A visit to the vet because Shelby has lost his interest in food delivers devastating news for Carmen. His days are numbered. She leaves the vet with a strange feeling at the back of her throat, almost like she could taste the fear of being alone. In the days that follow, the sadness that has been her company for some years now is replaced by a new feeling of panic.

Shortly after her visit to the vet Carmen presents at the GP clinic for her annual flu shot. The GP who sees her that day hasn’t seen her for at least ten months. As soon as she enters his consulting room he is struck by the amount of weight Carmen has lost, how drained and tired she appears, and that she is reluctant to make eye contact with him. He thinks to himself that a flu shot is not all she needs.