

SUMMERVILLE

Family Health Team

Welcome



Facing Mortality: Navigating Anxiety in Later Life

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Introduction



Welcome and Acknowledgment

- Today's topic is deeply personal and can stir many emotions.
- It's natural to feel nervous, sad, anxious, or reflective.

Purpose of Today's Session

- Facing mortality is not about giving up — it's about living more fully, finding meaning, and embracing peace.
- This is a safe, respectful, and supportive space. Sharing is welcome but never required.

Objectives

Objectives for Our Time Together

- **Normalize mortality-related anxiety:** Understand it is a common, human experience.
- **Explore coping strategies:** Learn tools to reduce anxiety and strengthen resilience.
- **Encourage reflection:** Reflect on your life's journey, values, and the legacy you wish to create.
- **Strengthen emotional connections:** Support open dialogue with loved ones and your community.

Engagement Invitation

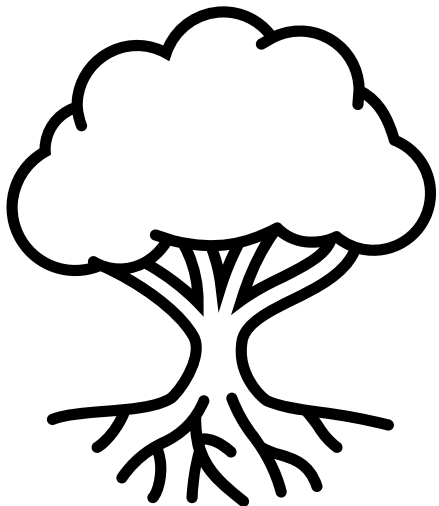
- Participate however you feel comfortable: listen, reflect quietly, or join discussions.
- Remember: Growth often starts by facing difficult topics with honesty and compassion.



Living with Mortality and Finding Meaning

Confronting our own mortality can stir a range of emotions — fear, anger, sadness, helplessness — especially when life events, such as a serious illness like cancer, make death feel immediate and real.

Yet, facing mortality can also open the door to finding deeper meaning, living more fully in the present, and reflecting on the legacy we wish to leave behind.



Awareness of life's limits can serve as inspiration to pursue passions, repair relationships and cherish moments. With age often comes resilience, perspective and acceptance.

Emotional
Strength in
Aging

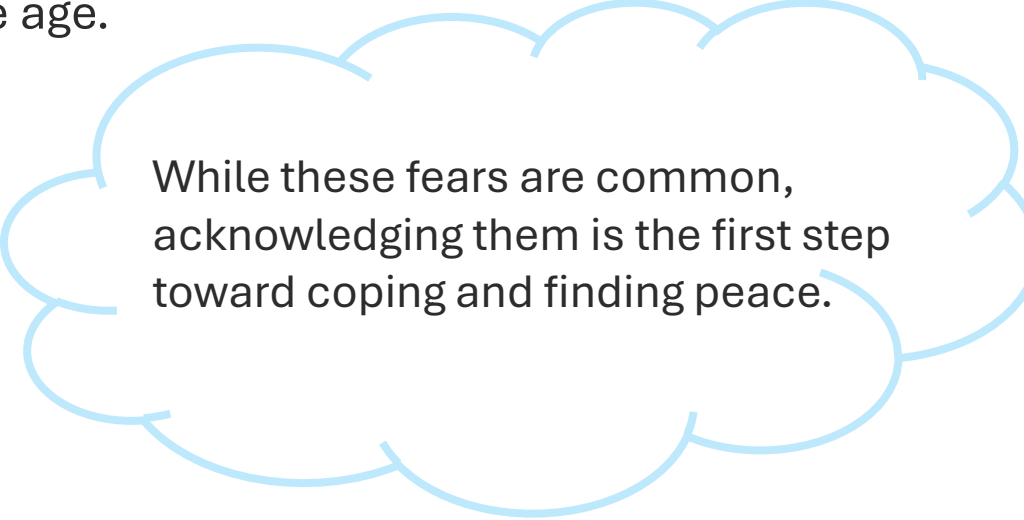
Understanding Mortality Anxiety

What is Mortality Anxiety?

- Emotional distress, fear, or unease when thinking about one's own death or the death of loved ones.
- A natural and common human experience, especially as we age.

Common Fears Associated with Mortality Anxiety:

- Physical suffering or pain
- Loss of independence and autonomy
- Separation from loved ones
- Fear of the unknown (e.g., what happens after death)
- Worry about unfinished business or unfulfilled dreams
- Concerns about being a burden to others
- Loss of control over one's future or circumstances
- Spiritual or existential uncertainty



While these fears are common, acknowledging them is the first step toward coping and finding peace.

How Mortality Anxiety May Manifest:

- Avoidance of conversations about aging or death.
- Persistent worry or ruminating thoughts.
- Changes in mood: irritability, sadness, restlessness.
- Physical symptoms: fatigue, insomnia, tension.
- Withdrawal from family, friends, or usual activities.
- Difficulty staying in the present due to intrusive thoughts about death
- Heightened health anxiety and frequent health checks
- Fear, panic, sadness or grief when thinking about mortality and anticipation of loss
- Cultural and religious beliefs strongly shape whether mortality anxiety is felt as terror, curiosity, or peace.

Key Message:

Mortality anxiety is **not** a sign of weakness — it reflects the deep value we place on life, relationships, and meaning.

Recognizing these signs can help us approach mortality anxiety with compassion for ourselves and others

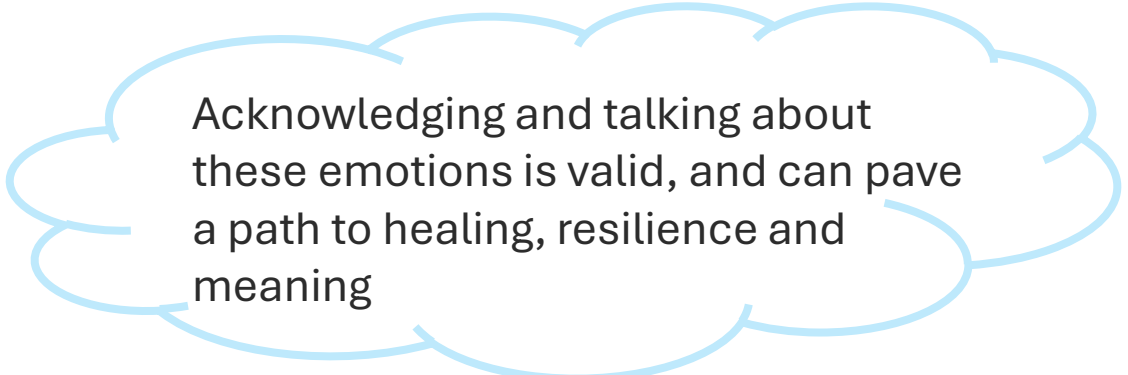


Psychological and Emotional Impact

Emotional Responses to Aging and Mortality

- It is natural to experience a range of emotions when facing the realities of aging and mortality.
- Common emotional responses include sadness, anxiety, anger, regret, and even relief or acceptance.
- Each person's emotional journey is unique and shaped by their life experiences.

- Emotions may shift over time — from fear and sadness to moments of gratitude, reflection, and even peace
- Coping with these emotions often depends on support systems, cultural/spiritual beliefs, and personal values
- Sharing emotions about mortality can reduce isolation and encourage deep connections with others that may be facing similar experiences.



Acknowledging and talking about these emotions is valid, and can pave a path to healing, resilience and meaning

Psychological and Emotional Impact

Emotional Responses to Aging and Mortality

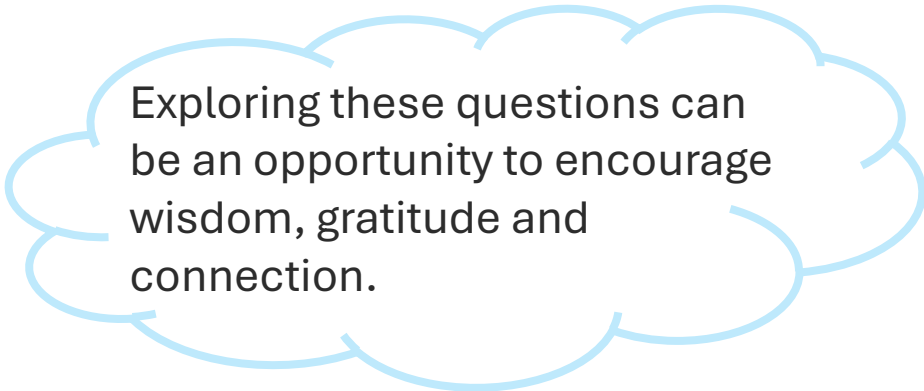
Anticipatory Grief

- Anticipatory grief refers to mourning losses *before* they happen.
- This could include grieving the loss of independence, physical strength, cognitive abilities, or the anticipated passing of loved ones.

Existential Questions and Meaning-Making

It is common to reflect on deeper questions in later life:

- “What has my life meant?”
- “Did I make a difference?”
- “What legacy will I leave behind?”
- “How can I find peace with the life I’ve lived?”
- “What dreams still matter to me?”
- “How do I want to be remembered by those I love?”
- Reflection on these questions can lead to renewed purpose or, if unaddressed, can increase anxiety.



Exploring these questions can be an opportunity to encourage wisdom, gratitude and connection.

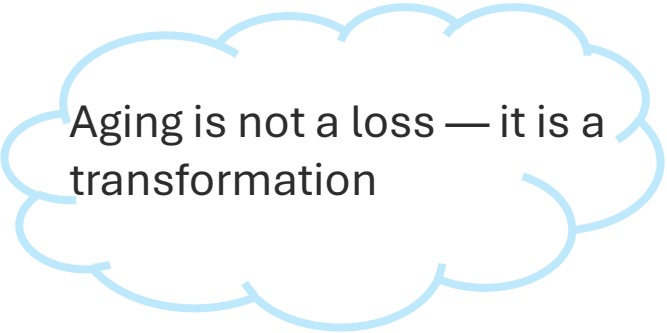
The Aging Process and Fear of Decline

- Aging brings natural changes in the body and mind that can contribute to feelings of anxiety and fear.
- These changes may include:
 - **Cognitive decline:** Slower memory recall, difficulty concentrating, or feeling mentally fatigued
 - **Physical decline:** Chronic pain, reduced stamina, or limitations in mobility
 - **Increased dependency:** Needing assistance with tasks once done independently
- These losses may challenge one's sense of identity, worth, or purpose, especially in a society that often values youth, productivity, and independence.
- Many older adults may grieve the person they once were, or fear becoming a burden to their loved ones.



The Aging Process and Fear of Decline

- **Societal messages about aging**—often negative—can worsen these fears. Media, workplace culture, and even health care systems may treat older adults as less capable or less valuable.
- Internalizing these messages may result in shame, withdrawal, or reluctance to seek help.
- It's essential to reframe aging:
 - Aging is a natural and dignified part of life.
 - With age comes wisdom, perspective, and the opportunity to mentor and guide others.
 - Aging does not mean life stops having purpose—it simply shifts in how purpose is expressed.
 - Older adults contribute through caregiving, volunteering, creativity, and storytelling
 - Aging can deepen appreciation for relationships and life's simple joys
- Resisting negative stereotypes fosters dignity empowerment and self-worth



Aging is not a loss — it is a transformation

The Role of Reflection in Coping

Reflection offers a powerful and therapeutic way to make sense of our lives, especially in later years.

Life review helps older adults reconnect with their core values, revisit meaningful memories, and integrate life events—both joyful and painful—into a coherent story.

Storytelling is not just about remembering the past; it's about passing on wisdom, sharing identity, and reinforcing one's place in the world.

Encourage creative legacy-building activities:

- Creating a memory book or timeline of key life events

- Writing letters to younger family members or friends

- Recording personal stories on audio or video



The Role of Reflection in Coping

Reflection shifts the focus from fear to gratitude:

- “I’ve had a full life.”
 - “I’ve contributed to others’ well-being.”
 - “I’ve overcome many challenges.”
 - Journaling or sharing in a group can help uncover moments of strength, pride, and love that might otherwise be forgotten.
 - Gratitude exercises, such as listing daily blessings, can reinforce a sense of fulfillment and peace.
 - Art, music, or storytelling can also serve as powerful tools for reflection and meaning-making.
 - Suggested journaling prompts:
 - What are three experiences that shaped who I am today?
 - Who are the people I’ve impacted in a positive way?
 - What wisdom do I want to leave behind?
 - What brings me joy or comfort in the present moment?
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Practical Strategies for Managing Anxiety

There are practical, research-supported strategies that can help older adults manage anxiety related to mortality and aging.

- **Mindfulness and Breathing Exercises:**

- Mindfulness involves focusing your attention on the present moment without judgment.
- Deep breathing (e.g., box breathing or 4-7-8 technique) helps calm the nervous system and reduce physical symptoms of anxiety.

- **Cognitive Reframing:**

- Replace unhelpful or fearful thoughts with more balanced, empowering ones.
- Example: Change “I’m running out of time” to “I can still make today meaningful.”

- **Gratitude Practice:**

- Keep a daily or weekly gratitude journal.
 - Focus attention on small joys and moments of connection, even in difficult times.
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5 4 3 2 1 – Grounding Technique

LOOK

5 things you can see

FEEL

4 things you can feel

LISTEN

3 things you can hear

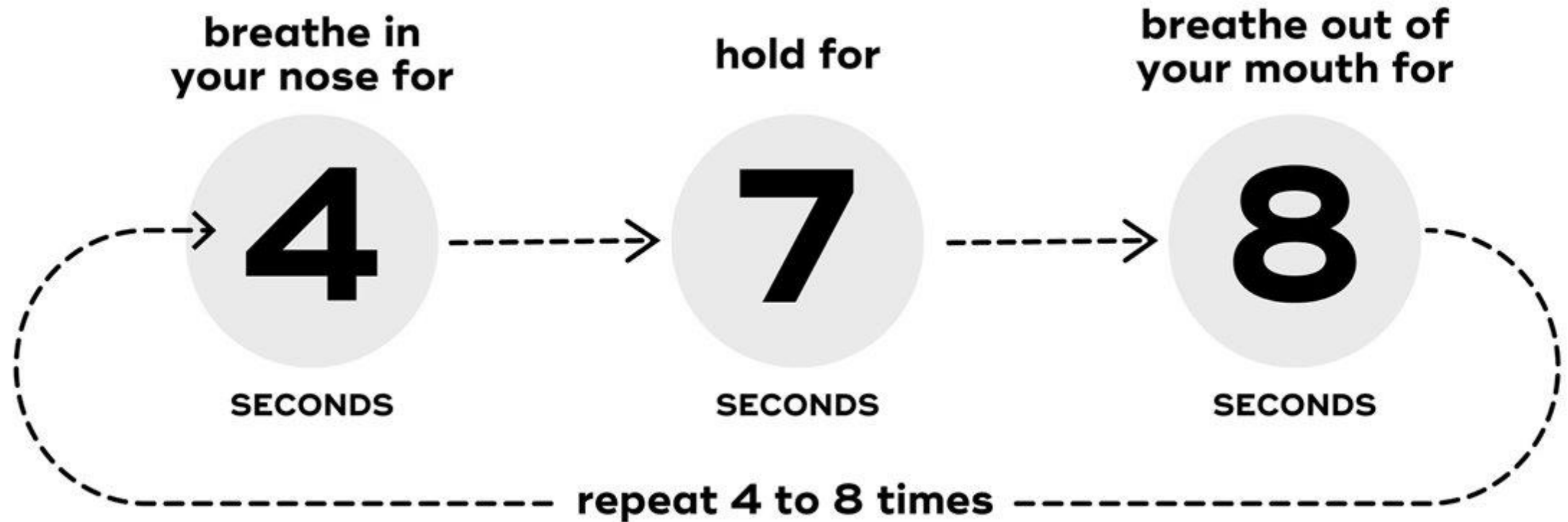
SMELL

2 things you can smell

GRATITUDE

1 thing you are grateful for

4-7-8 Breathing Technique



Practical Strategies for Managing Anxiety

- **Journaling and Expressive Writing:**
 - Writing can help clarify feelings and provide emotional release.
 - Prompts: “What am I afraid of?” “What gives me peace?”
 - **Engagement in Purposeful Activities:**
 - Activities that offer a sense of contribution or joy can help counteract feelings of helplessness.
 - Examples: Volunteering, gardening, mentoring youth, joining clubs or community groups.
 - **Physical Activity:**
 - Light exercise like walking, yoga, or stretching can boost mood and improve sleep.
 - **Creative Expression:**
 - Art, music, dance, and storytelling can provide comfort and open new paths to healing.
 - Encourage participants to try a few of these strategies and notice which ones resonate most.
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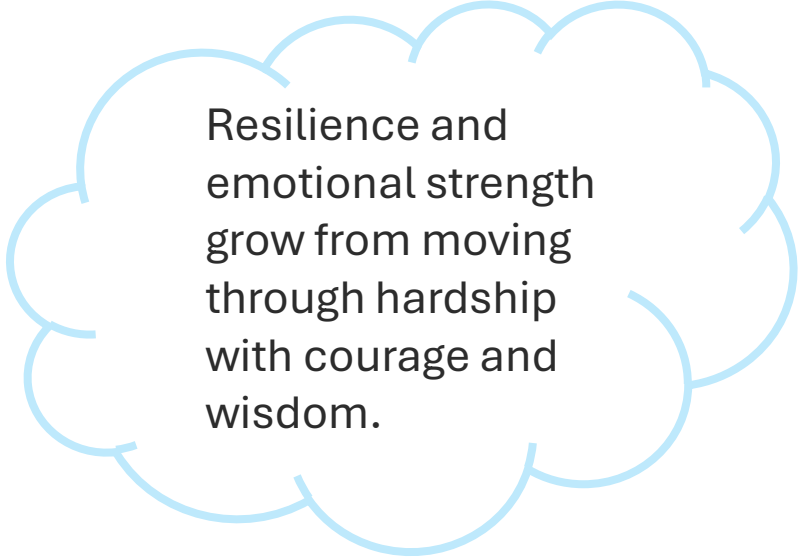
Building Resilience and Emotional Strength

What Is Resilience?

- Resilience is not about being unaffected by challenges—it's about adapting and recovering despite them.
- In later life, resilience helps individuals face loss, change, and uncertainty with courage and hope.
- Resilience is strengthened by connection —family, friends, and community support all reinforce coping.
- Spirituality can provide an anchor during times of uncertainty.

Emotional Strength in Aging

- Emotional strength often increases with age as people develop greater perspective, acceptance, and the ability to let go of what they cannot control.
- Older adults may have faced numerous hardships and survived them—this lived experience is a powerful foundation for resilience.



Resilience and emotional strength grow from moving through hardship with courage and wisdom.

Building Resilience and Emotional Strength



Ways to Strengthen Resilience:

Connection and Community:

- Strong social ties buffer against stress and help reduce feelings of isolation or despair.
- Encourage nurturing existing relationships and seeking out new ones—e.g., joining support groups or community programs.

Self-Compassion:

- Be gentle with yourself when struggling. Aging is not a personal failure—it is a universal experience.
- Replace harsh self-talk with affirming statements: “I’m doing the best I can today.”

Meaning Making and Purpose:

- Engage in activities that bring joy and fulfillment —can be creative, spiritual, or personal
- Focus on acts of kindness and gratitude that reinforce a sense of purpose

Building Resilience and Emotional Strength

Purpose and Meaning:

- Identify what still brings you joy, meaning, or a sense of contribution.
- Ask: “What gives my life purpose right now?” or “How can I continue to make an impact?”

Flexibility and Adaptability:

- Practice adjusting to life’s changing realities—physically, emotionally, and socially.
- Being open to new routines, roles, or identities is a hallmark of emotional resilience.

Positive Role Models:

- Reflect on people (real or fictional) who have aged with grace and strength.
- Ask: “What qualities helped them thrive?” and “How can I adopt some of those qualities myself?”

Quote to Reflect On:

- *“You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them.” –*
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The Role of Relationships and Communication

The Protective Power of Connection

- Strong, supportive relationships help reduce loneliness and existential fear.
- Sharing your thoughts and feelings can lighten emotional burdens and offer new perspectives.
- Aging adults often thrive when they feel emotionally connected to family, friends, or community.
- Intergenerational relationships can provide renewed purpose and joy — grandchildren, nieces, nephews, etc.
- Community belonging often provides comfort and strength. E.g. clubs, volunteer organizations, faith groups.

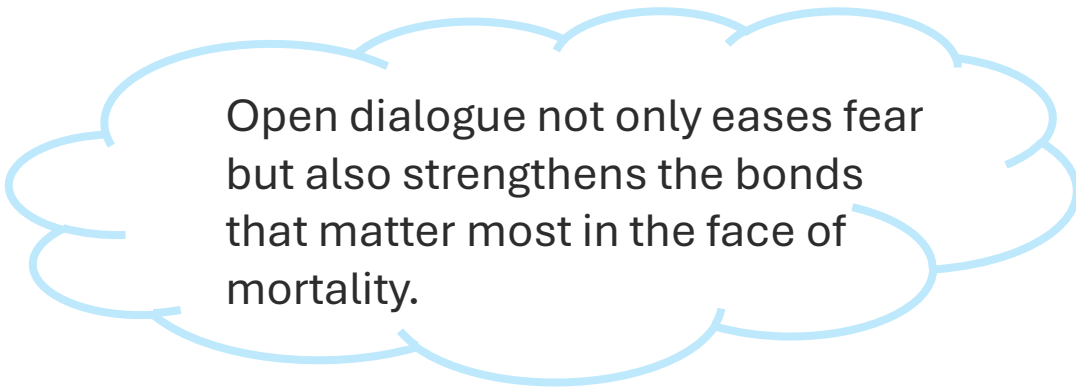
Why Communication Matters

- Open conversations about aging and mortality, while difficult, can build closeness, prepare loved ones, and foster peace.
 - Honest communication ensures your wishes are known and respected.
 - Avoiding the topic may leave loved ones unprepared or uncertain about how to support you.
 - Communication builds trust and helps loved ones feel included and safe.
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The Role of Relationships and Communication

Strategies for Meaningful Dialogue

- **Start small:** “I’ve been thinking about some of the changes in my life, and I wanted to share them with you.”
- **Use “I” statements** to express feelings without blame.
 - Example: “I feel anxious about being alone as I age.”
- **Choose the right time:** Find a quiet, unrushed moment where you feel emotionally grounded.
- **Be patient:** Not everyone will be ready to talk immediately. Give others time to process.



Open dialogue not only eases fear but also strengthens the bonds that matter most in the face of mortality.

The Role of Relationships and Communication

Who to Talk To

- Family members, close friends, spiritual advisors, health professionals, therapists, support group peers.
- You don't have to share everything with everyone—choose people who will listen with care and respect.

Legacy Through Conversation

- Sharing life stories, values, and lessons can be a powerful way to build emotional legacy.
- Conversations about what matters most can bring closure, reduce regret, and deepen relationships.



The Role of Relationships and Communication

Suggested Prompts to Start Discussions

- “What are the most important lessons you’ve learned in life?”
 - “What are your hopes for the next chapter of your life?”
 - “Is there anything you’ve always wanted to say to your children or grandchildren?”
 - “What gives you the most joy or comfort right now?”
 - “What traditions, values or stories do you want to pass on?”
 - “When have you felt the proudest in your life?”
 - “What conversations do you wish you had earlier in life?”
 - “How have you grown stronger through challenges?”
 - “What do you know now that you wish you had known when you were younger?”
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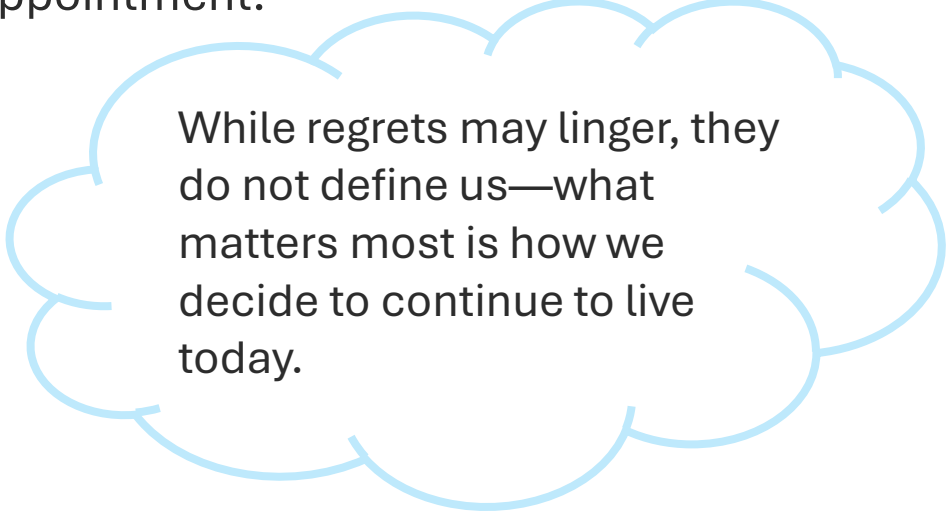
Addressing Regret, Guilt, and Unfinished Business

The Emotional Weight of Regret

- Many older adults reflect on past decisions with a sense of loss or disappointment.
- Common regrets may include:
 - Not spending enough time with loved ones
 - Lost opportunities (education, travel, relationships)
 - Words left unsaid
- Guilt often stems from perceived failings as a parent, partner, or friend.

Pathways to Healing Regret and Guilt

- Practice self forgiveness— imperfection is part of being human
- Focus on the present — creating meaningful moments now can ease the impact of past regrets
- Reframe — regrets of the past are lessons that shaped the resilience and wisdom you possess today



While regrets may linger, they do not define us—what matters most is how we decide to continue to live today.

Addressing Regret, Guilt, and Unfinished Business

Why This Matters

- Unresolved guilt and regret can lead to anxiety, low self-worth, and sadness.
- They may also create barriers to peace of mind and acceptance in later life.
- Avoiding these feelings doesn't make them disappear—facing them with compassion helps relieve their hold.

Reframing Regret as a Catalyst

- Rather than viewing regret as failure, consider it a teacher:
 - “What does this regret show me about what matters to me now?”
 - “How can I use this awareness to guide my current choices?”



Addressing Regret, Guilt, and Unfinished Business

Practical Tools for Healing

- **Writing a Forgiveness Letter**
 - Write a letter (even if not sent) to someone you hurt—or to yourself—offering forgiveness and expressing what you wish had happened.
 - **Guided Imagery**
 - Picture your younger self and offer them the grace, love, or understanding they needed at that time.
 - **Make Amends Where Possible**
 - A phone call, an apology, or even a small act of kindness can help bring closure.
 - **Legacy Actions**
 - Channel regret into positive acts: donate, teach, support someone going through a similar experience.
 - **Mindful Acceptance**
 - Practice acknowledging regrets without judgement—notice and gently release.
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Case Example (Composite)

“Margaret, age 77, always felt a deep sadness about not reconnecting with her brother before he passed away. Instead of holding onto that regret, she wrote him a letter expressing the things she never got to say. She later shared fond memories of their childhood with her grandchildren and planted a tree in his honour. These small but meaningful actions helped her feel closer to him and brought a sense of peace.”



Embracing Meaning and Legacy

- Many older adults find comfort in exploring the question: “What do I want to be remembered for?”
 - This exploration is not just about what has been done, but about how we’ve lived.
 - **Legacy isn’t just financial or material—it’s emotional, relational, and spiritual.** Examples include:
 - The values you instilled in your children or community
 - The laughter you shared with friends
 - The kindness you extended to others
 - The wisdom you offered, even informally
 - Legacy can live on through stories told, traditions carried forward, and love passed down.
 - Small gestures often leave the greatest impact!
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Embracing Meaning and Legacy

Legacy work can involve:

- Creating ethical wills (documents that pass on values and life lessons)
 - Compiling photo albums or family trees
 - Supporting causes or mentoring others
 - Consider these prompts:
 - “What matters most to me now?”
 - “What kind of ancestor do I want to be?”
 - “What would I want someone to say in a letter about my life?”
 - “What do I hope my presence has given to others?”
 - “If my life were a story, what would the central theme be?”
 - Legacy isn’t about having lived a perfect life. It’s about the meaning made from it, and how that meaning lives on in others.
-

Closing Reflections

Facing mortality isn't about giving up. It's about choosing to live with clarity, intention, and connection.

Suggested next steps:

Reflect using the journaling prompts discussed today.

Talk to someone you trust about your hopes, fears, and wishes.

Explore books, support groups, or spiritual practices that bring peace.

Legacy is not perfection — it is the love, wisdom and meaning we leave woven into the lives of others



Senior Wellness Programs in the GTA

- LOFT Community Services – Seniors Program: Integrated services for older adults with complex needs, including mental health. Phone Number: 416-979-3028
- Toronto Senior's Helpline Centralized phone line that connects seniors to mental health and community services. Phone Number: 416-217-2077
- Ontario Health at Home – Peel Region: Offers wellness programs such as SMART exercise and chronic disease self-management. Phone Number: 1-877-336-9090
- Peel Senior Link: Personal support services and social wellness programs to help seniors remain independent. Phone Number: 905-712-4413
- Wellness Centres (e.g., India Rainbow, Carefirst, Yee Hong): Culturally specific programs for mental and physical wellness in seniors.
- Mississauga Seniors' Centre: 1389 Cawthra Rd - Phone Number: 905-615-4810
- Active Adult Centre: Central Parkway Mall – 905-615-3207
- Mississauga Health Seniors Navigation Portal: Helping you access support services. Website: <https://www.mississaugaseniorsnavigation.ca/>