

Spousal death key link to loss of independent living for seniors

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The death of a spouse is always a tragedy, but for seniors, that tragedy can spur some significant life changes. And one University of Alberta researcher says the choices they make are something policymakers need to pay attention to.

Sociologist Lisa Stroschein says that losing a partner can [precipitate](#) the need for the surviving spouse to leave the residence they once shared. And the [bereavement](#) period is often key for them or their family members to decide whether it makes sense for that person to continue living alone or whether they give up living independently.

"Two people can take care of each other; they can share the burden of [household tasks](#) and may share income sources that allow them to live the kind of life that allows them to live independently," she said. "What this study shows is that, in fact, bereavement is a triggering mechanism (for the surviving spouse to move out of independent living)."

Stroschein's research noted that these seniors choose to either move into an institution or to reside with family members, most often their [adult children](#). She says that when it came to these decisions, men and women were both equally likely to having to move when their partner died. She also noted that [immigrants](#) to Canada were more likely to reside with their families than their Canadian-born counterparts. Yet, she says, more needs to be done to help seniors make the final choice of where to live, but when to move should be left to the seniors themselves.

"Perhaps we can do a better job of providing services and/or counseling for recently widowed [seniors](#) to help them make decisions that are going to be right for them," said Strohschein, "and provide more services for those ones that really do want to move out of independent living who say, 'I can no longer bear these burdens,' to ensure that they are supported."

Strohschein says that understanding the processes that lead to seniors' decisions to leave their homes is important for the government to acknowledge, especially with an aging population. She says that developing processes and putting services in place would allow these people to retain their independence and their dignity in their twilight years, which is critical to ensuring the system does not become needlessly taxed.

"How do we delay that onset of moving a person to institutional care, care that tends to be quite costly, and can be depersonalizing for the person who's receiving it," Strohschein said. "As people come towards the end of their lives, how do we give them the most ability and the greatest dignity to exercise their right or their need for independence?"

"Coming up with other kinds of options that are going to maintain seniors' independence as long as possible and give them the services that they need to help maintain that are going to be absolutely critical."

Provided by University of Alberta

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