



When a Parent Dies

It was so hard watching my mother die, particularly those last few hours. Her once robust body, now so very frail, lay curled up on the bed we had moved into the living room. At times her shoulder and arm repeatedly twitched and I felt the pain in me. Her breath went in cycles—rapid and loud, then slow and quiet. By nightfall her breath softened into perfect peace: The woman who had been my lifelong cheerleader was dead. She was 78 and I was 45, with grown children of my own. But I couldn't help thinking, "Mom, how can I go on without you?"



The loss of a parent is the most common form of bereavement, but that doesn't make it easy. Even when death occurs late in life, we as adults seldom are ready for the loss of a mother or father. We may have "parented our parents" before death, but in the memories of our childhood and youth we will always be their children.

YOUR SITUATION IS UNIQUE

For you personally, the death of your parent is a one-of-a-kind experience. Don't compare yourself to others. Even your own brother's or sister's bereavement can be quite different from yours. You, for example, may feel abiding peace amid moments of sweet sadness, while your sister seesaws between anger and numbness.

Although the person who died may not be your biological parent, he or she still may have been a parent to you—an adoptive parent, a stepfather, a grandparent who helped raise you, or an aunt who was like a second mother.

If the approach of your parent's death was gradual, such as in a progressive terminal illness, you may have started your grief work long before the actual death. If the death was the result of an accident, homicide, or abrupt illness, your grief may be more complicated and difficult. For those who did not enjoy a healthy relationship with their parent, lingering bitterness may dominate one's memories.

Of course, sometimes a parent dies at an early age, leaving behind young children. For these families, the fact sheet in this GriefWork series titled *Helping Children Deal With Death* will prove helpful.

MANY LOSSES, MANY CHANGES

Whether we are ready for it or not, the death of a parent can bring a number of losses and changes. Who else will remember the first words you spoke, or the way you used to go to sleep holding your teddy bear? Who will applaud your adult



achievements the way only a parent can?

There are typically other losses too—the long-term friendship of adult child and parent, the helpful (and sometimes not-so-helpful) advice, the emotional or financial support during hard times, and Mom and Dad’s home where the larger family may have gathered for holidays and celebrations.

Your parent’s affairs must be settled. If one of your parents is still living, you must attend to his or her needs. If both parents are deceased, there’s the financial and legal maze of probate, not to mention the difficult task of sorting through their physical belongings.

But perhaps the most daunting change of all is the realization that *you* have now become the older generation. The death of a parent brings a keen reminder of your own mortality—a shock that often promotes a healthy reevaluation of one’s life and values.

ALLOW YOURSELF FREEDOM TO GRIEVE

Sometimes our society gives the message that you should not openly express your feelings of grief—that it’s somewhat immature for an adult to do so. Or well-meaning friends might say, “Keep your chin up,” or “Stay busy.” If you avoid your pain, the people around you won’t have to deal with it. It’s easier on them. But pushing your feelings away is not healthy. Let yourself genuinely feel and express your unique experience of grief. Follow your heart; be true to yourself.

Don’t deny your grief. Don’t force it either, or run from it, or pretend it away. ***Simply be open to your feelings in the present moment.*** Be open to your pain; go into it, experience it. Embrace your sorrow, your regrets, and whatever other emotions may arise. Let go; trust yourself. It’s OK to cry, it’s OK to get mad, it’s OK to enjoy fond memories and laughs. And it’s OK if your predominant feeling is a sense of inner peace.

Remember that grief is a process: It takes both time and a willingness on your part to embrace your feelings and thoughts and to share them outwardly. Find someone who is open and nonjudgmental, someone you like and trust, and talk with them as you go through your bereavement journey.

ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS FOR HEALING

Here are seven other suggestions that may assist in your journey of healing and growth:

- **Take care of yourself physically.** Carve out some time—now—to catch up on your rest. Do your best to eat regular, nutritious meals. Take some walks in the fresh air, or enjoy other forms of exercise that appeal to you.
- **Forgive.** Even in the best of relationships, there usually are memories that need healing. Ponder your relationship with your parent. Bring to mind points of hurt and regret. Without rushing, forgive yourself for being human; and forgive your parent for the times he or she failed you. As often as you feel led to do so, repeat this exercise. If the hurts are deep, consider professional help. A good counselor can help you heal and grow.
- **If spirituality is important to you, draw on this resource.** In whatever way you relate to God, or to a higher power, pour out your heart and seek guidance. Times of solitude, inspirational reading, prayer, meditation, and community worship can comfort and enlighten you as you confront the mystery of death. Trust the spirit within you. Listen for and follow the silent whisperings of your inner guidance.



- **Talk with your parent.** Find some moments of solitude, perhaps late at night or early in the morning. In your heart (or out loud if you wish), talk to your parent as if he or she were right there with you. Say whatever is on your mind. Say everything you wished you would have said while they were still alive. Then be quiet for a few moments until you feel a sense of peace.
- **Write letters.** You don't have to be a great writer for this exercise. If you can put together a grocery list, you're hired. Write two or more letters to your deceased parent. Write whatever you want in your first few letters. If you are angry, lonely, depressed, fearful, happy, or excited, write to your parent about these feelings. Let your last letter be a message of gratitude: "Dear Mom, I want to tell you one last time how much I appreciate all you did for me. . ."
- **Treasure fond memories.** Collect mementos of your mom or dad and put them in a scrapbook. This can be a healing adventure for you, as well as a treasure you can repeatedly enjoy and share over the years with special loved ones. Or you might have a pot luck dinner for family and close friends of your parent. After dinner, volunteers could take turns sharing memories. Perhaps you could tape record their memories.
- **Offer a gift to your parent.** Think of a little something you would like to do that would also please your deceased parent. Offer this as a gift. For example, in your heart you might say to your father: "Dad, I remember how you used to volunteer at the soup kitchen and help feed the hungry. As a way of celebrating your life, each year, around the time of your birthday, I'm either going to volunteer at the local community kitchen or send them a donation. I look forward to doing this in loving memory of you."

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