

Whether 4 or 64, a void opens when mom is gone forever

Daughters WITHOUT MOTHERS



MOTHERLESS DAUGHTERS: Jacqui Meriwether, Lillian Habeich and Lisa Hedquist are members of the Daughters Without Mothers support group. Meriwether leads the group.

JENNIFER GRIMES, TRIBUNE

BABY FACE: Mary Habeich poses with her daughter Lillian. Mary died in 1992 when Lillian was 26.

COURTESY OF LILLIAN HABEICH



Life after Loss

If you are a woman who has experienced the death of your mother and wish to meet and talk with other motherless women, call Hospice of the Valley to register for Life after Loss: A Group for the Bereaved. This is a new version of the drop-in group Daughters Without Mothers, which used to meet twice a month. This group, led by bereavement counselor Jacqui Meriwether, will meet 1 p.m. Wednesdays for eight weeks starting May 21 at Changing Hands Bookstore in Tempe. Attending is free; donations are welcome. (602) 530-6971.



COURTESY OF JACQUI MERIWETHER

Lillian Habeich's mother died in 1992. "To this day, I would love to have a phone call to heaven," she said.

While losing her mother at age 26 gave her a certain strength, she still gets the urge to pick up the telephone and reach out to her. It's a common sentiment among women whose mothers have died: The feeling of "wanting your mommy" never wanes.

"When I hear someone talking to their mother about advice, that's the part I really miss, where I still feel the loss," said Habeich, 37, of Phoenix. Her mother, Mary Habeich, died of cancer at age 66.

"Losing your mother is a major, major impact in your life," said Jacqui Meriwether, a bereavement counselor with Hospice of the Valley. "It really impacts your self-esteem and your orientation to life."

To some children, Mother's Day represents a joyous — or at least benign — occasion to send a card or carnations and make a visit or phone call. But to women who have lost their mothers, it's for mourning and remembrance.

"For me, one of the most difficult parts of the year is seeing all the Mother's Day cards," said Lisa Hedquist of Tempe, whose mother died in 2001. "I want to avoid that aisle."

Today, Meriwether will reread her mother's journals. She feels blessed to have a decade of them, dating from 1983 to 1993.

Hedquist will take her children to the cemetery to put flowers on her mom's memorial plaque and then release balloons.

Habeich adopts a "surrogate mom" — a maternal figure or mentor — and does something nice for her. This year, she sent a card and flowers to Sister Raphael at Sts. Simon and Jude School in Phoenix. She will also call a friend who has lost her

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ALL BUNDLED UP: Helen Meriwether holds her daughter Jacqui. Helen died at age 84 and Jacqui started a support group called Daughters Without Mothers in July 2002.

Mother loss throughout life

"Mother loss is difficult at any time, and at any stage," writes Hope Edelman in her book, "Motherless Daughters" (Delta Books, 1994). "Regardless of our age, we yearn for a mother's love throughout our lives reaching for the security and comfort we believe only she can provide at times of illness, transition or stress." However, mother loss has different lasting effects on a woman, depending on when the loss occurred. Edelman outlines these in a chapter titled "Times of Change." They are paraphrased here.

Early childhood (6 and younger): Unless a woman receives consistent nurturing from a warm, loving caretaker — often another relative — she can have trouble later on with issues of trust, security and forming attachments.

Late childhood (6 to 12): Some therapists say this is the most difficult time to lose a same-sex parent. For a girl who loses a mother at this stage, her identifications about what it means to be a woman can come to a premature halt. Children might also refuse to talk about the death and deal with it. They might also quickly transfer all their feelings to the nearest adult. Into adulthood, they might feel "stuck" at the point in their childhood when their mother died.

Adolescence (teen years): Any of the developmental tasks of adolescence may be halted or disrupted including: Developing autonomy, dealing with authority figures, learning to live with ambivalence and ambiguity, developing a capacity for intimacy, solidifying a sexual identity, learning to manage emotion, developing a personal value system and maintaining a sense of adequacy and competence.

Young adults (the 20s): This is the age that women often start a friendship of sorts with their mothers — they begin to value their mothers' empathy, wisdom and experience. And it's the age women are venturing out of the house, but want to remain connected in a way. Losing a mother at this stage severs an important bond, and also leads to "secondary loss." A woman in her 20s will imagine all the events their mother will miss, like attending her wedding and being a grandmother to her children.

Later years: Though an adult's personality is already formed, mother loss leaves a void like no other. It causes feelings of anger, abandonment and sadness.

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mother, because there's no way for others to understand the magnitude of the loss unless they've experienced it.

When you lose your mother, "you've become part of a club you don't want to belong to," Hedquist said.

A LOSS LIKE NO OTHER

A mother's death is like no other loss, and it's particularly traumatic for women.

"You're a different person afterwards," said Meriwether, 64, of Chandler. "You're left to carry on the identity alone."

That's why Meriwether started a support group called Daughters without Mothers in July 2002.

"It's helpful to reach out to people who have gone through what you've gone through," Hedquist said. "I think unless you've lost your mother, you don't understand the intense feelings."

It's different from other deaths in a family, like a father's or sibling's death.

"Whether it's a daughter or a son, the loss of a mother typically means the loss of the nurturing parent in the household and the loss of the emotional center of the family," said Hope Edelman, author of "Motherless Daughters."

Though traditions are beginning to change, mothers, with few exceptions, are the primary caretakers of the day-to-day physical needs of children. They get up at night to feed them when they're babies; they prepare most of the meals as kids grow up. They help dress them and bathe them. They stay home with them when they're sick.

Mothers also tend to provide more affection and compassion, such as making a child feel better after an experience with a bully. They make holidays special. They keep contact with relatives. These family connections often are lost after a mother dies, even if the children are grown.

That's why a child who has lost her mother usually feels lost and abandoned — even as an adult. The loss is more significant for a female child because it means the loss of a same-sex role model.

"Mothers look at daughters and inevitably and naturally see a younger version of themselves," Edelman said, "and a girl looks at her mother and inevitably and naturally sees

History of Mother's Day

Originally, Mother's Day had nothing to do with cards or gifts. The first public recognition of Mother's Day was in 1908, when Anna Jarvis of Philadelphia organized a day to honor her mother, who had died. Mother's Day became a national holiday in 1914. Jarvis later fought the commercialization of what we today deem a "Hallmark holiday."

• For more information on the history of Mother's Day, visit www.holidays.net and www.biography.com.

If you still have your mom

If you're fortunate enough to have your mother with you today, here are some ideas for enhancing your relationship with her:

- Look through old photo albums and have mom tell you about them.
- Prepare an old family recipe together.
- Plant a garden, take a class or start a book club together.
- Tell your mother stories about your day, but don't complain and don't expect her to solve your problems anymore.
- Create a memory jar. Write down a memory of your mother each day and put it in a container. At the end of the year, present it to her.
- Listen to your mother tell stories about her past. It's your history, too.
- Get to know your mom as a person, not just as a mother.

Source: Mayo Clinic

herself as a woman."

When a woman approaches the age at which her mother dies, she often fears and assumes that what happened to her mother will happen to her, whether it's an accident, suicide or terminal illness.

Depending on the stage of life a woman is in when her mother dies, the long-term effects will be different (see cover). But no matter how old a woman is when her mother dies, there is a certain void forever.

"You feel like you've become an orphan," said Hedquist, 41. She's thankful that her mother, Pat Roman, got to know her grandchildren. But she laments that because cancer took her at age 64, they didn't get more time with her.

"I look at how close I am with my grandmother, and my children will not have that," she said.

CYCLE OF MOURNING

The mention of Mother's Day can still bring tears to the eyes of those who have lost their mothers, even decades after the fact.

"The loss of a mother is something you never get over," Edelman said. "Part of the reason we have this whole cultural fixation on 'getting over' a loss is because we're taught that grief is this three- or four- or five-step process; it's linear."

Instead, mourning goes in cycles.

"You'll go through a period of calm, and then something will trigger grief," she said. For instance, a woman will graduate, get married, start a business or have a baby. "They wish their mother were there to share with them or help them through it, and then they have a grief response all over again."

For Habeich, graduating from Columbia University stirred up emotions, especially because her mother was an alumna.

"It felt like something was missing," she said.

Everyday events, too, can lead to an ache. Seeing daughters and mothers shopping at Target makes Hedquist sad. For Habeich, giving her medical history at the doctor's office is a reminder of the loss.

"Because (my mother) died of cancer," she said, "I have to constantly bring that up."

Mothers are also somewhat immortal in the mind of a child — even a grown child.

"You take your mothers for granted that they're always going to be there," Hedquist said. It's a scary prospect to

lose that comfort and security.

"Inside that 64-year-old woman is a 4-year-old girl," Meriwether said. Meriwether was 56 when her mother, Helen Meriwether, died at age 84.

Even if a daughter has a less-than-perfect relationship with her mother, the grief runs deep. Meriwether said some people refuse to admit they miss their mothers, but she thinks this is a defense mechanism.

"A lot of the people don't want to go down to the painful level of examining," she said.

TAKING MOM FROM IDEAL TO REAL

Meriwether said the most surprising thing she's learned while leading the support group is that women tend to idealize their deceased mothers. Since the advent of Freudian psychoanalysis, it has been common practice to blame mothers for the wrongs in our lives. But in death, mothers suddenly become saints.

"Most everybody has positive memories of their mothers, and they don't recollect conflicts," Meriwether said.

Or maybe they're afraid to admit them, out of guilt.

"There are societal expectations about what your relationship with your mother is going to be," Habeich said, "and I think if it's other than ideal, it's difficult to express it or say it to anyone."

Edelman said many women feel conflicted after their mother dies, and they have "a great deal of anger and sadness that they'll never get to reconcile issues." As long as mom was alive, the hope for patching up differences was there.

This is where a good therapist can help.

Edelman said, "What they really need to resolve is the inner turmoil that they're experiencing as a result of their mother's behavior or their relationship with their mother, and that can be done without the mother present."

She added, "You need to make peace, not necessarily with the mother, but with one's own feelings toward the mother, and one way to do that is to feel compassion — not pity — for mother. Learn about who she is as a woman."

"You can humanize your mother when you can step back and see her not just as your mother, but as a woman in the world," Edelman said. "And then you can feel the same solidarity with her and you can completely change the relationship — even if she's dead."

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