



When a Parent Dies

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Nearly 12 million people each year experience the death of a loved one. Intellectually, we know that death is inevitable, however sometimes we manage to convince ourselves that it won't happen to our parents. Paradoxically, the longer they live, the longer this childhood fantasy endures. The reality of serious or chronic illness will chip away at the irrational belief that they are going to live forever, but it seems that we are never really prepared when this eventuality happens. Our parents may have lived well into their nineties and we may even be parents and grandparents ourselves, but when our mom or dad dies, the little child inside of us is often inconsolable.

There are certain questions and concerns that are common to all people who grieve the death of a loved one; "How long is this going to last?" "Is it normal to feel this

way?" "What do I do with a loved one's belongings?" But, like the issue mentioned above, the death of a parent offers an additional set of challenges.

It does not help that our society, which avoids the topic of death, offers considerably less sympathy when a parent dies versus the death of a child or spouse. Our bosses and co-workers might have been surprisingly supportive during a parent's final illness, but when we return after the funeral we are often expected to quickly return to pre-loss performance levels. Friends and acquaintances often disappoint us by their inability to empathize. A spouse whose parents are still alive may not be able to relate and your children continue to rely on you for their every need despite your depleted emotional reserves.

Siblings are a whole other story. We expect our siblings to "get" how we feel; after all, mom or dad was their parent too, right? Regardless of how close our family ties have been in the past, after our parent's death some part of us usually hopes for a closer relationship with siblings. We conclude, "Now that the parents are gone, they are the only family we have left." It is wonderful when the bonds between

siblings are strengthened, but unfortunately improved relations are often another fantasy that is not always possible to fulfill. Many people tell me they feel let down by their siblings who just aren't there for them. What we need to remember is that every person grieves at their own pace and in their own way. For better or worse each sibling had his or her own unique relationship with the parent who died. Over the years each has developed their own set of coping skills and each has their own life stressors to deal with. Remembering these factors helps to put our expectations in proper perspective. Old rivalries which were once thought of being resolved often bubble to the surface. Conflicts can also arise when the time comes for distribution of the estate or personal effects.

Another stressor for adults who have experience the death of a parent is concern for the surviving parent. Worrying about a grieving parent is understandable. Often we don't know how to help them and they can't always articulate what they need. They may live alone or at a distance and it is hard to tell how they are doing. Additionally some adult children feel an added burden of caring for a sick or elderly parent. Another problematic area for adult children occurs when the surviving parent starts dating again or enters into another intimate relationship. The question of how to honor the memory of your deceased parent while welcoming the new person into the family can often be complicated.

If you are grieving the death of your second parent you may be feeling like an orphan. No matter how old we are when our parents die, on some level we experience what is called an existential crisis, our very existence feels threatened. Somehow just having our parents in the world provided us with a sense of safety. Ideally, they gave us

unconditional love and now we realize there is no one who is going to love and understand us in exactly the same way. Parents are irreplaceable and the world will never be the same without them.

When a parent dies many people say they feel like they have to finally grow up, step it up and take responsibility-for everything! It is not that they haven't held down a job or started raising a family of their own but more that they realize that their identity has shifted. They feel like they can no longer claim to be the child of someone. While it is true that the death of a close family member will result in shifting roles, that does not mean that you have to have it all figured out right at this very moment. It takes time to learn new skills, it will also take time to learn a new way of being in the world.

Confronted by the death of a parent we begin to see the fragility of life in a whole new way. When our parents die we realize that someday, we too will die. That may sound silly to some people; of course we will die - some day. However, what I hear from members of my support group for parental loss is that the death of a parent is a sort of wake-up call. Mom or dad's death motivates many to reevaluate their own lives. Some vow not to make the same mistakes. Still others resolve to make every day count or they begin to reassess their values and belief system. This kind of introspection, although triggered by a great sadness, is perhaps an unanticipated gift of grief. The end result is a needed change in the way you live your life.

Not everyone who experiences the death of a parent will be devastated by the loss. Many will be sad, but they will manage to carry on with their daily responsibilities. Their grief will dissipate and adjustments to life without the parent will be surprisingly

smooth. In some cases our parents lived a good long life. Perhaps you were fortunate to have the chance to say good bye or your parent's death was perceived as a blessing or as a release. If that is your situation, I want you to know that you do not have to feel guilty that you are not doing worse. Your grief is what it is. To those who are having a harder time than they expected, I give you permission to continue to grieve at your own pace. It is a mistake to put a framework or timeframe on grief. Most of us discover that as time passes we find ways to adjust to their absence and eventually recover some semblance of a normal life. Many of us would like to think that grief can be turned off like a faucet. In reality it is more like a faucet that leaks. The rate of flow will eventually be reduced but we will continue to miss them around birthdays and holidays and other special family occasions for the rest of our lives. Occasionally we will be blindsided by a memory and the tears will again start to flow. No matter what you are feeling right now, please do not be discouraged by ongoing grief. Those tears are a testament to the depth of your relationship and a sign of your enduring bond of love.

I've noticed that two different groups have a particularly difficult time with the death of a parent. Not surprisingly those who had a very close relationship usually have a difficult time adjusting to a world without them. The second group that has a difficult

time are people who had a conflicted or strained relationship with the parent who died. One might think that they would be glad the old so and-so is gone! But the truth of the matter is that grief is extended, intensified or complicated by unfinished business. In this case the unfinished business might be the result of not hearing the parent say things like; "I'm sorry," "Please forgive me," "I love you" or "I'm proud of you." At times it is also the other way around. The distress is due to the belief that the finality of death prevents the possibility of ever resolving the relational conflicts. I would simply like to suggest that it is never too late for you to come to some place of peace about a conflicted relationship. If you find yourself having a particularly difficult time coming to terms with the death of a parent, it is never too early or too late to seek out the help of a counselor and work on the things that are troubling you.

Grieving the death of a parent has its unique challenges and coping with the loss may be one of the most difficult challenges of life. But as you move beyond the pain of loss, you have the opportunity to discover a legacy that remains. Although they have died, a part of them endures; in your and your children's genetic code, in the lessons they taught you, in your memories and in your beating heart. Allow these to be your consolation and your inspiration to carry on.

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