

Parent Loss Resources

What is Parent Loss?

Your mother or father has died. Whether you had a good, bad or indifferent relationship with the parent who died, your feelings for him or her were probably quite strong. At bottom, most of us love our parents deeply. And they love us with the most unconditional love that imperfect human beings can summon.

You are now faced with the difficult, but necessary, need to mourn the loss of this significant person in your life. Mourning is the open expression of your thoughts and feelings about the death. It is an essential part of healing.

While the **death of a parent** is a rite of passage; no adult child should expect a parent's death to leave them unaltered. It is quite normal for a parental death to have a profound effect on even the most stable of people.

The death of a parent imposes an unexpected crisis for healthy, well-functioning adults. This crisis may lead to psychological distress, [depression](#), [alcohol use and abuse](#), and impaired physical health.

These effects are generally unnoticed as the adult child mourning the loss of their parent assumes that they are unusual for their strong response.

Society gives few messages that seem mixed about how to "appropriately" grieve for parents. Loss of a parent is the single most common form of bereavement in this country. However, the unstated message is that when a parent is middle-aged or elderly, the death is somehow less of a loss than other losses. The message is that grief for a dead parent isn't entirely appropriate.

After all, the death of a parent is the natural order of things.

When a parent dies, we are supposed to be prepared for this normal life passage, or at least be more ready to accept it when it happens. We are expected to pick ourselves up, close the wound quickly, and move on. We should not require much time to get over it.

Again, the death of a parent is the natural order of things.

However, just because the death of a parent is commonplace and is the natural order of things, this does not mean a person can or should be expected to simply and quickly bounce back.

On the contrary, the death of one's parent(s) is extremely difficult for most if you have had a good relationship with your parent(s) and even if you haven't. In fact, sometimes the latter makes it even more difficult due to unresolved issues or conflicts.

When a parent dies, it can be unexpectedly devastating and cause considerable upheaval in even an adult son or daughter's life. The magnitude of this loss can take you by surprise and helpful resources are not that plentiful.

Here are a few suggestions for coping with the natural order of things, or when a parent dies:

1. Don't expect to be ready for the natural order of things; you won't be.

2. Never let anyone belittle this loss, make you feel guilty for grieving deeply, or hurry you through your grief. You are entitled to feel all of grief's intricacies and all of grief's intensity.
 3. Grieving for a parent, like all grief, can be exhausting emotionally, physically and spiritually. Be kind to yourself.
 4. This work of grief takes time; the process must not be hurried. And it is never entirely over.
 5. Even as an adult, don't be surprised by feelings of abandonment and uncertainty that you experience.
 6. After they are gone your parents will continue to be a part of your life, just in a different sense. You will always be their son or daughter.
 7. Grief does not end. Rather grief comes and goes. And then it comes again.
 8. If you feel the need, seek out support from others who've been there, a friend who cares, or a professional who can help guide you through the work of grief.
- When a parent dies, yes, it is the natural order of things.
But taking time to grieve for them should be as well.
- When a parent dies, we lose the chance to show them the people we become as we get older. We lose the ability to learn the wisdom their age and experience brings.
- There is an added component when you find yourself suddenly the oldest generation in the family. A new set of pressures lies with you on top of the grief you are going through.
- We may no longer be small children, but even as adults, we were our parent's child. When a parent is gone, we lose the title of "someone's child" forever.

What is Loss?

Loss is the involuntary separation from something we have possessed and perhaps even treasured, or someone we love and care about.

Everyone experiences a loss at some point in their lives – whether it is major or minor. Loss is universal.

Loss involves emotional pain. Significant losses produce emotional upheaval. Loss requires change and uncertainty and adjustments to situations that are new, unchosen, and uncertain.

There is no right or wrong way to feel after you experience a loss. Minor losses, such as the loss of an opportunity, may bring feelings of frustration, disappointment, or anger. Major losses can lead to similar feelings, overwhelming feelings, sadness, pain, or numbness.

You do not have to be "strong" after a loss to protect others around you. Expressing emotion is how the body and mind process and relieve the pressure of intense or overwhelming emotions. Crying or expressing other emotions does not make you less of a person. It is also not uncommon for people to feel numb. People who don't cry may still be feeling the effects of a loss. Everyone expresses their pain differently.

No one can tell you how you should feel about something. Anyone who tries to tell you that how you are feeling is wrong is wrong.

Sudden Losses are losses that happen due to accidents, crimes, or suicides and that do not give us any time to prepare. These type of losses can often shake us to the core, making us question the stability of life. The loss can feel immediate, severe, and agonizing. It can be difficult to sort through many emotions and feelings at the same time, and it may take time and space to adjust to the loss.

Predictable Losses, like those due to terminal illness, allow for us to prepare for the loss. This type of loss also creates two layers of grief: anticipatory grief (the grief related to the anticipation of the loss) and the grief related to the loss itself.

One reason loss is so difficult is that it can be permanent. As humans, our lives are so fluid that the idea of permanence can be difficult to grasp. Further, if your life is structured around the person, object, or concept lost, it can be difficult to adjust to new patterns and routines.

How to Cope with Loss:

Grief is one of the most common reactions to a loss. There are typically five stages of grief:

1. Denial
2. Anger
3. Bargaining
4. Depression
5. Acceptance

These stages may happen in any order, at any time, or not at all. Some people feel some but not all of the stages of grief. Because there is not a typical loss and each situation is different, it is hard to figure out what a “typical reaction” is. Some people feel:

- Shock and disbelief – difficulty accepting what happened, numbness.
- Sadness – one of the more common feelings experienced. This may also be emptiness, despair, loneliness, and crying.
- Guilt – things you said, shouldn’t have said, or wanted to say, not preventing the death.
- Anger – feelings of anger and resentment.
- Physical symptoms – aches, pains, headaches, nausea, changes in sleep or weight.

However you are feeling, it can be overwhelming and out of control. One way to manage intense emotions is to observe, describe, and label your emotions. Sometimes putting a name to your emotion can help you express it. Also remember that we experience emotions like a wave – the emotion will build, crest, and recede.

Talk to friends and family who love you and make you feel good about yourself. Lean on people who love you and care about you.

Don't expect that you're going to "get over it." The only way to "get over" a loss is to go through the stages of grieving. There's no reason to try to be the strong one – just let yourself feel however you feel.

Write about it. Sometimes the act of writing down how you're feeling can help solidify those feelings and help you to grieve your loss.

Let yourself feel the loss. The only way to get through a loss is to go through the stages of grief. You can't bypass it, no matter how much you'd like to. Sit with your feelings and acknowledge them.

Talk to a therapist or grief counselor – someone who is trained to help you get through your grief.

Exercise – exercise releases endorphins, which are the "feel-good" hormones.

Don't minimize your own loss. If it was a loss, it was a loss. Losses are meant to be grieved.

Don't compare your loss to others' loss. It's apples and oranges. You feel a loss how you feel it, not how someone else feels it.

Be sure to take care of yourself. Go through your daily hygiene routines, get up, and do something.

IT'S OKAY TO BE SAD!

Tips for Coping with the Loss of a Parent:

Remind yourself that you have **every right to grieve** the loss of your parent. An adult child may be the forgotten mourner as other family members assume that the adult child has moved on with their life and is not as affected by the illness or death of a parent. It's not true. The loss of a parent is painful at any age.

Release your feelings:

Find ways to grieve and share the memories of your parent.

Reach Out for Support

Consider getting support from a grief counselor. These professionals are trained to help you understand your feelings and find additional ways to cope. Look into support groups, which allow you to connect with other people who are coping with the loss of a parent.

Lean on family and friends. They can be a great source of comfort during the loss of a parent, even if they've not experienced the loss of a parent themselves.

Perhaps the most compassionate thing you can do for yourself at this difficult time is to reach out for help from others. Think of it this way: grieving the loss of a parent may be the hardest work you have ever done. And hard work is less burdensome when others lend a hand.

If your parent was old, you may find that others don't fully acknowledge your loss. As a culture, we tend not to value the elderly. We see them as having outlived their usefulness instead of as a source of great wisdom, experience, and love. And so when an elderly parent dies, we say, "Be glad she lived a long, full life" or "It was his time to go" instead of "Your mother was a special person and your relationship with her must have meant a lot to you. I'm sorry for your loss."

Blended or nontraditional families can also be the source of disenfranchised grief. If you have lost someone who wasn't your biological parent but who was, in the ways that count, a mother or father to you, know that your grief for this person is normal and necessary. You have the right to fully mourn the death of a parent-figure.

Seek out people who acknowledge your loss and will listen to you as you openly express your grief. Avoid people who try to judge your feelings or worse yet, try to take them away from you. Sharing your pain with others won't make it disappear, but it will, over time, make it more bearable. Reaching out for help also connects you to other people and strengthens the bonds of love that make life seem worth living again.

Be Tolerant of Your Physical and Emotional Limits

Your feelings of loss and sadness will probably leave you fatigued. Your ability to think clearly and make decisions may be impaired. And your low energy level may naturally slow you down. Respect what your body and mind are telling you. Nurture yourself. Get enough rest. Eat balanced meals. Lighten your schedule as much as possible.

Allow yourself to "dose" your grief; do not force yourself to think about and respond to the death every moment of every day. Yes, you must mourn if you are to heal, but you must also live.

Embrace Your Spirituality

If faith is part of your life, express it in ways that seem appropriate to you. Allow yourself to be around people who understand and support your religious beliefs. If you are angry at God because of your parent's death, realize this feeling as a normal part of your grief work. Find someone to talk with who won't be critical of whatever thoughts and feelings you need to explore.

You may hear someone say, "With faith, you don't need to grieve." Don't believe it.

Having your personal faith does not insulate you from needing to talk out and explore your thoughts and feelings. To deny your grief is to invite problems to build up inside you. Express your faith, but express your grief as well.

Search for Meaning

Use the tragedy of losing a parent to grow as a person. Use it to change how you approach your own aging process. Use it to become a better friend and partner and to learn how to express the love you have for others.

You may find yourself asking "Why did Mom have to die now?" or "What happens after death?" This search for the meaning of life and living is a normal response to the death of a parent. In fact, to heal in grief you must explore such important questions. It's OK if you don't find definitive answers, though. What's more important is that you allow yourself the opportunity to think (and feel) things through.

Treasure Your Memories

Though your parent is no longer physically with you, he or she lives on in spirit through your memories. Treasure those memories. Share them with your family and friends.

Recognize that your memories may make you laugh or cry, but in either case, they are a lasting and important part of the relationship you had with your mother or father.

You may also want to create lasting tributes to your parent-child relationship. Consider planting a tree or putting together a special memory box with snapshots and other keepsakes.

Move Toward Your Grief and Heal

Grieve in measured doses. Life does, indeed, go on. Don't force yourself to think all day every day about your parent's death. Of course you must mourn to heal, but you must also go on with your life.

Forgive yourself for being human. Some of us have remarkably troubled relationships with our parents, and the loss of a parent may cause us immeasurable guilt, as there's no amending any past troubles.

To live and love wholly again, you must mourn. You will not heal unless you allow yourself to openly express your grief. Denying your grief will only make it more confusing and overwhelming. Embrace your grief and heal.

Reconciling your grief will not happen quickly. Remember, grief is a process, not an event. Be patient and tolerant with yourself. And never forget that the death of a parent changes your life forever.

Pay Attention to Your Health.

Grief often leaves people feeling physically and emotionally exhausted. It makes sense to eat regularly and rest when you need to. A visit to your family doctor is also a good idea. Your doctor can assist you in understanding the symptoms of grief. When you're not feeling like yourself, reassurance from a doctor you trust can be very comforting.

Watch Out For Grief That Turns to Depression:

What Are The Symptoms of Major Depressive Disorder?

The main symptom of Major Depressive Disorder is a pervasive feeling of sadness, loss, anger, or frustration that interferes with daily life for more than two weeks, however there are often additional symptoms a person experiences. Please call your doctor if these symptoms appear for longer than two weeks;

Other symptoms of MDD may include:

- Agitation, restlessness, and irritability
- Change in appetite and weight
- Difficulty concentrating
- Fatigue
- Feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness, self-hate, and guilt
- Loss of interest in activities that were once enjoyable
- Thoughts of death or suicide
- Social isolation – ignoring social requests, preferring to stay in alone
- Changes in sleeping patterns

Symptoms in Older Adults

In older adults, MDD may look a bit differently than it does to those younger which unfortunately means that older adults may be under-diagnosed with MDD. Here are some specific symptoms of major depressive disorder in the elderly:

- Memory difficulties or personality changes
- Physical aches or pain

- Fatigue, loss of appetite, sleep problems or loss of interest in sex — not caused by a medical condition or medication
- Often wanting to stay at home, rather than going out to socialize or doing new things
- Suicidal thinking or feelings, especially in older men

Symptoms in Children and Teens:

Common signs and symptoms of depression in children and teenagers are similar to those of adults, but there can be some differences.

- In younger children, symptoms of depression may include sadness, irritability, clinginess, worry, aches and pains, refusing to go to school, or being underweight.
- In teens, symptoms may include sadness, irritability, feeling negative and worthless, anger, poor performance or poor attendance at school, feeling misunderstood and extremely sensitive, using recreational drugs or alcohol, eating or sleeping too much, self-harm, loss of interest in normal activities, and avoidance of social interaction.

The Emotions You May Feel After A Parent Dies:

Your grief is unique. No one grieves in exactly the same way. Your particular experience will be influenced by the type of relationship you had with your parent, the circumstances surrounding the death, your emotional support system and your cultural and religious background.

As a result, you will grieve in your own way and in your own time. Don't try to compare your experience with that of other people, or adopt assumptions about just how long your grief should last. Consider taking a "one-day-at-a-time" approach that allows you to grieve at your own pace.

Expect to Feel a Multitude of Emotions

The parent-child bond is perhaps the most fundamental of all human ties. When your mother or father dies, that bond is torn. In response to this loss you may feel a multitude of strong emotions.

Numbness, confusion, fear, guilt, relief and anger are just a few of the feelings you may have. Sometimes these emotions will follow each other within a short period of time. Or they may occur simultaneously.

Sadness – it's expected to feel sad after a parent dies, but the overwhelming grief may catch you off guard. Especially if it's the second parent to die, leaving you an adult orphan.

Anger – if you came from an abusive or dysfunctional family, it may bring those feelings of unresolved anger back out to the surface. If you came from a loving family, you may be angry that you've now lost it forever.

Relief – if your parent was ill before they passed away, you may feel relief when they do die. The relief may be especially evident if you were the caregiver for your sick parent. Feelings of relief do not imply you are a “bad person” or “bad child”; it’s a natural response.

Guilt – should you have had a difficult relationship with your parent, you may experience guilt over what was said (or what was not said). Maybe you feel guilt because you didn’t spend enough time with your parent. Guilt is very normal.

Abandonment – even as an adult, you may feel deeply abandoned when your parent dies. You are no longer their child and you no longer have those ties to your past. Abandonment is especially common when both parents are deceased.

How The Death of a Parent Impacts the Family:

Grief is as unique as the person who experiences it.

If you have siblings, the death of a parent will affect them differently than they affect you. The death of a parent may bring up old (and new) rivalries between siblings, and this is natural following a parent’s death. You and your brothers and sisters may disagree about the funeral, for example, or argue about family finances. Recognize that such conflicts are natural, if unpleasant. Do your best to encourage open communication during these times.

When the death of one parent leaves the other a widower, try to understand how difficult the death of their spouse was. Dealing with the loss of a spouse is very different than losing a parent. Try to be as caring and compassionate as you can toward your surviving parent. Here is a resource for partner loss.

The death of a parent may be very challenging for your children to handle. Just as your relationship with your parent was unique, their relationship with their grandparent was also unique.