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**When Your Parent Dies**

# When Your Parent Dies

No matter how old you are, losing a parent through death can be overwhelming. You reminisce, and you miss the best times of your relationship. You may berate yourself for not having taken enough time to be with your parents.

When a death is sudden, the impact can be greater because there is no anticipatory grief work which comes with extended illness. However, your parent could have been ill for many years and all the impact of the loss is not actually felt until their death. Prior to that, all your energy went to caring for the ailing parent and there was little time for your own feelings of loss.

Your parent's death is hard because you are losing your past...your heritage. Often you are losing your best friend, the person you fell back on when troubles came, and the only person who truly knew how to make you feel better. Your role shifts to caring, rather than being cared for, and it is hard.

Add to all those feelings and pain the added responsibility of helping your surviving parent cope with their loss of a spouse. Sometimes sharing the loss helps. Often it compounds the hurt because we all feel and express our hurt in different ways.

Do not expect too much of yourself. Do not be embarrassed because other people you know may have coped better with the loss of their parent. Do not blame yourself for birthdays missed and too little time spent. No matter how much you did for your parent, it never seems enough when measured against what they did for you.

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.

Blended or non-traditional 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.

You can ease the fear of the unknown and make the transition towards acceptance a little less traumatic by knowing some of the common emotions you may feel. There are also some traps you should avoid in preparing for the grieving process.

The following are guidelines, not checklists. You are not abnormal if you do not experience all of the feelings, or if you experience some emotions that are not mentioned. Remember, if you have children, they feel for your pain and the loss of their grandparent. Grief is a personal journey and everyone will eventually come to terms with the loss, in their own way.

### **WHAT YOU MAY BE FEELING:**

- Pain:** This can feel almost overwhelming at times and may feel as if it will never go away. It can be so intense that you may be susceptible to illness and accidents.
- Guilt:** This is a common emotion after the death of a parent, especially if there were unresolved issues or problems with your mom or dad.
- Shock:** A feeling of confusion and disorientation is common after the death of a parent.
- Fear:** This is a common reaction, as you realize your own mortality.

- ❑ **Responsibility:** You may feel a deep sense of responsibility to your surviving parent or siblings.
- ❑ **Feeling Out of Control:** You will no doubt feel many emotions at once. This may have a tendency to make you think you are going crazy. You are NOT going crazy. You are grieving.

### **Problems to Avoid:**

- ❑ **Relationship Problems:** Be open and honest with your family members and close friends. Try not to withdraw. There is a tendency to think “no one hurts like I do.” Try to concentrate on how your grief is alike, instead of how it isn’t, so you can share your grief.
- ❑ **Losing Sense of Self:** Be supportive to your surviving parent. But do not try to take the place of your mother or father. Each person ultimately has to work through their own grief. You cannot protect them from it.
- ❑ **Ignoring Self:** Do not attempt to hide your feelings in an effort to be strong for your other siblings, accept their support. It makes them feel good to help you. Helping others is one of the best ways to deal with our own problems.
- ❑ **Substance Abuse:** Avoid trying to numb your emotions with medication or alcohol. This only adds to the problem in the long term. Try to realize that you can get through, even though things seem impossible. Tranquilizers can actually delay your grieving, which is destructive.

Pace yourself: the journey of grief can be long. Take each day at a time.

(Arborcare Bereavement sponsored by  
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