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HELPING YOURSELF HEAL WHEN A PARENT DIES

by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

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 summons.

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.

Realize Your Grief is Unique

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.

While everyone has unique feelings about the death of a parent, some of the more common emotions include:

Sadness. You probably expected to feel sad when your parent died, but you may be surprised at the overwhelming depth of your feelings of loss. It's natural to feel deeply sad. After all, someone who loved you without condition and cared for you as no one else could have is now gone. If this was your second parent to die, you may feel especially sorrowful; becoming an "adult orphan" can be a very painful transition. You may also feel sad because the loss of a parent triggers secondary losses, such as the loss of a grandparent to your children. Allow yourself to feel sad and embrace your pain.

Relief. If your parent was sick for a time before the death, you may well feel relief when he or she finally dies. This feeling may be particularly strong if you were responsible for your ill parent's care. This does not mean you did not love your parent. In fact, your relief at the end to suffering is a natural outgrowth of your love.

Anger. If you came from a dysfunctional or abusive family, you may feel unresolved anger toward your dead parent. His or her death may bring painful feelings to the surface. On the other hand, you may feel angry because a loving relationship in your life has prematurely ended. If you are angry, try to examine the source of that often legitimate anger and work to come to terms with it.

Guilt. If your relationship with your parent was rocky, distant or ambivalent, you may feel guilty when that parent dies. You may wish you had said things you wanted to say but never did — or you may wish you could unsay hurtful things. You may wish you had spent more time with your parent. Guilt and regret can be normal responses to the death of your mother or father. And working through those feelings is essential to healing.

As strange as some of these emotions may seem, they are normal and healthy. Let yourself feel whatever you may be feeling; don't judge yourself or try to repress painful thoughts and feelings. And whenever you can, find someone who will hear you out as you explore your grief.

Recognize the Death's Impact on Your Entire Family

If you have brothers or sisters, the death of this parent will probably affect them differently than it is affecting you. After all, each of them had a unique relationship with the parent who died, so each has the right to mourn the loss in his or her own way.

The death may also stir up sibling conflicts. 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 part to encourage open communication during this stressful family time. You may find, on the other hand, that the death of your parent brings you and your siblings closer together. If so, welcome this gift.

Finally, when there is a surviving parent, try to understand the death's impact on him or her. The death of a spouse — often a husband or wife of many decades — means many different things to the surviving spouse than it does to you, the child of that union. This does not mean that you are necessarily responsible for the living parent; in fact, to heal you must first and foremost meet your own grief needs. But it does mean that you, a younger and often more resilient family member, should be patient and compassionate as you continue your relationship with the surviving parent.

Reach Out to Others for Support

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.

Allow Yourself to Search for Meaning

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 okay 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

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.

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