

# The Grief of Losing a Parent

Our society places enormous pressure on us to get through grief. But how long do you grieve for the man who was your father for 30 years? Do you grieve less for your mother of 50 years? The grief is real because loss is real. Each loss has its own imprint, as distinctive and unique as the person we lost.

After a parent dies, we take another look at them. We realize, perhaps for the first time, all they did for us as children. For some of us, when we become parents, we appreciate the challenges our own parent must have gone through. We gain a new perspective on their lives. If we idealized our parent when we were kids, now we also see their flaws and imperfections. Before a parent is gone, we understand intellectually that they will die someday. But understanding and anticipating does not prepare us for the grief we feel when it actually happens.

## **Grieving differences**

As we work to balance our inner and outer worlds, we may be surprised to discover that each of us grieves differently. Even among siblings, one may grieve with many tears and the other with none. One may feel supported in a group, the other may crave time alone with their grief. Without being aware of it, some of us tend to feel that our way of grieving is the right way. We think others should grieve like we do. Regardless of the grief we feel, we usually tend to think we're "grieving the right way (our way)" or judging ourselves that we are grieving the "wrong way."

In the end, we need compassion for ourselves and for those around us. We have suffered a great loss in our life, one that has shaken us to the core, and even more so if we are one of the many who lost one parent right after the other, leaving us feeling even more disconnected from the world.

## **Practical Obligations**

In our grief, while heavy emotions flow within us, we are still called upon to complete the practical obligations of tying up the loose ends of our parent's world. One of the tasks laid before us in our grief is taking care of our parent's possessions. Whatever their possessions may be, whether the most valuable items or small inexpensive things they collected over the years, they all are symbolic. They represent things that meant enough to our parent that they chose to keep them. People often find this an overwhelming task.

### Taking care of your parent's possessions

- Consider inviting a friend to help.
- Use this as a journey of discovery to reveal memories that were long forgotten by you.
- You can also use this difficult process to learn new things about your parent.

- You may feel like you are invading their privacy, but remember—who else would they want to do this besides you? Who would protect their privacy and their dignity better than you?
- Have a camera with you. Items that you want to remember but will never use again can be remembered with a picture and given to someone who can use it.

### Letting go of items

It may be hard to let go of certain things that represent your parent to you. Other items you may want to give to friends and family members. Keep some of them and give the rest away to a charity of your choice. This can be your parent's final gift to the world. Imagine how these things could help someone else who does not have the money or resources to buy everything they need. Now, someone else can get pleasure from and find usefulness for some of your parent's prized possessions.

### When you have a surviving parent

Some of you may be packing up a deceased parent's belongings with a surviving parent. You may be the one gently helping them get through this task. Be patient, be kind and make time to talk about memories.

### **Life without Mom or Dad in the World**

Whether our parent lived near or far, are emotionally close or distant, they ground us in the world. We don't often think of them as an unseen anchor, but in truth, they hold a place in our own history. Intellectually, we know they will die some day, but how do we imagine something that has always been there, suddenly being gone?

The death of a parent delivers us to a world we have thought about but could never fully prepare for. We are suddenly exploring new terrain, feeling as if the ground has been pulled out from under us. And in a symbolic way, it really has been.

### A new relationship

As we heal, we learn who we are and who our parent was in life. In a way, as we move through grief, healing brings us closer to the person we loved. A new relationship begins—not a physical relationship but one where the parent lives on in your heart. You will continue to remember them, think of them and love them, for the rest of your life.

Little by little, we withdraw our energy from the loss and begin to invest it back into life. We put the loss into perspective, learning how to remember our loved ones and commemorate the loss. In the days to come, as time passes, memories may still hurt, but in time it will hurt less frequently. All that your parent was, all the love you shared and the relationship you had will not die. That depth of love, that depth of caring, is everlasting. We can never replace our parent, but we can strengthen our family connections as we find new and deeper meaning in our existing relationships.

Adapted from publication on Dignity Memorial by David Kessler

*If you have questions or concerns about the grieving process,  
please give us a call at (716) 836-6460 or email [griefsupport@palliativecare.org](mailto:griefsupport@palliativecare.org)  
for more information, resource and support.*

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