

# Surviving the Loss of a Parent

*"Some way I had been conditioned when I was young to think that I would be grown up when I was forty. You don't need your mother. But after my mother died, I collapsed. I kept thinking, "I'm forty years old and yet I feel like a child."*

Forty-year-old woman whose mother died at age 69.

Many people are surprised at the intensity of emotions they feel when their parent dies. Even if you are in your adult years, you may respond to that death as if you are still a child. You may feel guilty or angry, vulnerable or frustrated; you may feel like an orphan or even closer to death. You may even feel as though you were released from a burden.

Several factors may produce these emotions. Examining these factors may help you gain a more thorough understanding of the context of your grief. In other words, you may be better able to recognize and understand *what* is happening to you after the loss of your parent, and *why* it is happening.

## Believing That Your Parent Is Immortal

Although the belief that one's parent could live forever seems ludicrous, many adult children are astonished to realize that they may have nurtured the subconscious belief that their parent's death would not actually occur. For some, the denial is deeply and firmly entrenched. Equally as strong may be the conviction that if their parent's death does occur, it will not be from any demoralizing, debilitating disease. Their parent's death is visualized as one that is painless, uncomplicated, or possibly even "romantic."

*"He had been hospitalized a couple of times in his life but in my mind he was still immortal. What he did pass on to me was the concept that my family was immortal. It was an attitude more than it was any kind of conversation. He wasn't going to die. He was never going to die."*

Thirty-two-year-old man reflecting on his father's death.

## Feeling Closer To Death

When your parent dies, suddenly you realize that you may be next in line for death. You become acutely aware of the quantity and quality of your remaining life.

*"I had the feeling, 'I'm the next to die. There's nothing between me and death now.' My mother was going to protect me from death. Her life was going to protect me from death."*

Forty-year-old daughter.

## Losing Your Protection

When you lose the buffer between yourself and death, you may feel extraordinarily vulnerable to the world in general. The adult child who loses a parent often feels like an

orphan, a forsaken child. At the same time, the adult child steps into the generational position previously held by the parent.

*"I remember one of the worst things when my mother died...the first voice to come into my head was, 'I'm the mommy now, forever.'"*

Woman who lost her mother during middle age.

Now you're the "older generation." This oldness brings with it new responsibilities, that of presiding over the younger generation, and reconciling yourself to meeting death head-on with no intermediary. During this time, as you feel the protection of your own life dissolve, you also may feel that your other loved ones are more vulnerable. If one of your parents is still living, you are more acutely aware of the imminence of his or her death. Your increased awareness may reflect itself in new resolutions regarding your own behavior.

*"I have a consciousness about saying goodbye now that I didn't have before my mother's death. Even when my husband and I have real arguments I still say goodbye now. I am going to see my father who is eighty-five this summer, and I really want to make sure I get a sense of completeness with him.*

Woman whose mother died after a short-term illness.

## **Losing Your Home**

Everything a parent represents to a surviving offspring can be fully understood only by that daughter or son. But for all, the loss now represents a void in their life. How that void is perceived and experienced depends on the surviving individual's beliefs and predilections.

*"Losing your parents takes away your home, your place to go."*

Middle-aged man whose mother died.

*"I lost my place of retreat, my defender, my home base where I could always know I was accepted."*

Young woman whose fifty-year-old mother died of cancer.

## **Longing**

Often there is a sense of discontinuity when a parent dies. The survivor thinks, "If only my father or mother could see me now and be proud of me," or "help me now," or "advise me now." There also is longing that occurs in the course of normal, everyday life. You may find yourself feeling empty and despairing because you cannot pick up the phone and call your parent, run by to see how he or she is, or join your parent in an ordinary activity the way you used to. You long more than anything to have your parent there to enjoy a favorite TV program, share a favorite food, play a game of cards, or take a walk in the neighborhood.

## **Needing To Blame**

Surviving adult children may experience great surges of anger, guilt – or both. You may be angry with God for taking your parent, be angry with the doctor, or a brother or sister for not taking better care of your parent. You may feel hatred toward what you consider to be an unfair world. All of this gives you someone or something to blame. Guilt serves the same purpose. As long as you think there is someone to blame, even if it has to be yourself, you can assume your parent's death was controllable.

## **Death As A Catalytic Agent for Unfinished Business**

A parent's death may bring feelings of regret or self-recriminations, similar to the ones below, to the surface:

- My father never told me he loved me.
- My mother never said, "You're all right."
- I was never able to discuss some specific important part of my parent's life such as why my mother divorces my father, how my father's behavior was affected by his alcoholic parents, why my parents never wanted another child, or why my father never grieved after my brother's death.

Unfinished aspects of the parent-offspring relationship can be tormenting and may take on added importance as each day passes. If you have found yourself reviewing similar unfinished business, you may also be wishing, "If only I had another chance, I would ask the unasked question, make the admission that was too painful, or venture to initiate discussion into forbidden or ignored territory."

## **Parent's Personal Unfinished Business**

Sometimes an adult child's emotional pain originates from a disturbing or shocking confession made by a parent during the final days. The parent may have expressed deep regrets about past behavior, or may even have perceived his or her life as having been worthless. Witnessing the emotional distress of a father or mother during the parent's physical decline in the face of death may leave the survivor with disturbing and haunting images. In such cases, death mandates that the survivor needs to become he forgiver of the parent's guilt as well as their own, if he or she is to heal.

## **Role Reversal**

Many adult children experience a role reversal toward the end of their parent's life, where they assume the role of parent and the parent becomes their child. This typically occurs when a parent has a terminal illness or is the victim of senility. You may have attended to your parent's physical and emotional needs, and to have met many demands a child would have made. The memories of your own actions in such a situation may now cause some emotional distress.

*"I scolded Mama for not eating, not cleaning her plate. I always tried to make her eat as if she were a baby. Now I realize she had no appetite and she had probably decided she wanted to die at home. I made too much fuss over her meals. I didn't have any respect for her wishes."*

Sixty-eight-year-old woman reflecting on the last months of her mother's life.

## **Compounded Stress**

Adult children may feel a profound sense of relief that their parent has died, especially if they provided long-term care, were physically and/or emotional exhausted, or had several demands outside the realm of their dying parent, including job, family, and financial demands. This sense of relief, however, may compound your stress. Even though you feel released from an overwhelming burden, you may also feel guilty for experiencing relief. Although you are freed to return to a more normal, less demanding existence, you will still need to regain your footing, clear up neglected work, get physically rested, or replenish your exhausted funds.

## **How To Cope With Your Loss**

Many adult survivors of a parental death may try to hide their grief responses. As a grown son or daughter is supposed to accept a parent's death within the normal cycle of life's events. Though the loss may be extremely traumatic, you may feel that exhibiting emotional devastation is not "grown-up." Your grief, if suppressed, will last longer and be poorly resolved. In addition to finding comfort in expressing your feelings, you will find it helpful to (1) memorialize your parent in some way, (2) enjoy a healthy identification with your mother or father, and (3) develop an awareness of the final destination of your parent's presence.

*"I would urge a person who is grieving to allow yourself to feel whatever comes. Allow yourself a physical space if you can, go away to a place where you can really experience what you need to feel. Allow yourself to feel. It is a graceful state!"*

Forty-year-old woman survivor.

From: [Beyond Grief](#) by Carol Staudacher, 1987.

If you need additional information regarding parent loss and grief, or just need to talk to someone, please call us anytime, at Abbey Hospice, 770-464-5858.