

Adults Grieving the Death of a Parent

The death of a parent can be a shocking and life-changing experience. This is as true for adults as it is for children and young people. Adults, however, are expected to be able to cope, to get on with their life and to take things in their stride. The reality can be quite different.

No matter what age you are, you are always your parent's child.

Whether or not your relationship was close or difficult, whether contact was regular, or occasional and distant, parents are a reference point – one of the ways in which we define our sense of self and our place in the world.

Grief – a natural response

Grief is the powerful, often painful and confusing response to the loss of an important person in your life. It can change how you feel, physically and emotionally, how you think about things and how you behave.

It's important to remember that 'normal' grieving does not mean 'easy'.

Grief is a difficult experience; understanding the many feelings and sensations involved will not take the pain away, but it can help to make it more manageable.

It's easy to imagine that you are 'cracking up', that there is something physically and mentally wrong with you during this time of grief. Loss of appetite, sleeplessness, absent-minded behaviour, unexpected emotions – these are just some of the signs and symptoms of grief.

Grief is unpredictable. It doesn't stay the same each day but rather comes in waves so you may go through many different emotions in the same day.

Powerful feelings

“Suddenly it was like living in a house without a roof.”

This is how one man described the impact of his mother's death. A parent's death can shatter a lifetime bond. Depending on the nature of your relationship you may feel vulnerable and exposed.

“Dad was always there – I knew I could rely on him. What will I do now?”

Your loneliness can be made worse by other people's insensitivity and lack of understanding. The gap that has appeared in your life since the death may be invisible to those around you.

Few relationships are trouble free. We bring into adult life all of the hurts and misunderstandings of childhood.


Your parent's death may remove the chance to resolve difficulties or make amends. It can leave you struggling with powerful feelings or regret, guilt and anger as you try to come to terms with the changes in your life.

Changed relationships

The death of a parent may also result in significant changes in your relationship with other family members. You may feel a greater sense of responsibility to support and care for your surviving parent – a responsibility that can be difficult to manage as you cope with your own grief. This can be a source of great stress and emotion.

Your parent's death may mean having to reassess the past while dealing with the present.

Family members may also feel pulled in different directions; everyone has had a different relationship with the person who has died. Expect arguments and differences of opinion within the family.



Siblings may also find that the death of a parent brings up feelings of old jealousies and rivalries from childhood.

These differences and stresses can be a source of conflict and can result in disputes over wills, property and personal effects.

As you grieve

Try to be patient and understanding with yourself as you come to terms with your loss.

Allow yourself time to express your feelings.

Know that most people cope with a death privately and quietly. It may help to meet with someone outside of the family who understands what you are going through.

“...the death of a parent is not something that becomes easier with age, nor is it a loss that fades with time; on the contrary, a parent’s death stays with you and shapes you for the rest of your life; it becomes a condition of your existence, like having blue eyes or black hair.”

Rebecca Abrams,
When Parents Die. Routledge, 2000

Useful Resources

Irish Hospice Foundation

Further suggested reading is available from our Thérèse Brady Library,
library@hospicefoundation.ie

Bereavement & Loss Hub

www.bereaved.ie

Bereavement Support Line

Freephone 1800 80 70 77. Available Monday to Friday, 10am-1pm. In partnership with the HSE.

Produced by Irish Hospice Foundation’s Bereavement Education & Resource Centre
info@hospicefoundation.ie
(01) 679 3188
www.hospicefoundation.ie

With thanks to Jim Rhatigan

