



When an Adult Experiences the Death of a Parent

Your parent has died. Whether their death was sudden or expected, hearing the news or being there with your mom or dad in their final moments is a shock to your system. Life will no longer be the same without them. Changes abound no matter if you lived with them, saw them or spoke to them daily, or had less frequent contact.

Typical Reactions to a Parent's Death

While it is true that from the time you were a child you imagined, and perhaps feared, that your parent would die someday, you may not feel prepared for the overwhelming impact their death is having on you. A myriad of thoughts and feelings swirl around in your head. Your body reacts with physical ailments and symptoms. Emotional and spiritual issues arise as you ponder the meaning of life without your parent.

How Can This Be?

It is hard to fathom that your parent, who has always been there, is now gone. There were so many things you did together or had hoped to do with them. Now you must adapt to a new way of perceiving the world.

No One Can Take Their Place

Your parent is irreplaceable, no matter if they were your parent by birth, by adoption, or by circumstances. Whether you were on the best of terms or if you were experiencing challenges in your relationship, their death shakes up your family structure and profoundly effects your perception of yourself as a member of the family. Perhaps a great deal of your role identity and/or your daily schedule involved caring for your parent; all that changed with their death. No matter what your age, or how long you have been independent of them, you may find yourself longing to be someone's little girl/little boy again. Or you catch yourself thinking, "No one will ever love me or take care of me like my parent did."

I Have So Much to Do

If this is your first parent to die, you will not only be going through your own grief process, but you will very likely be witnessing your surviving parent's grief. They may need you to comfort them in their sorrow. It may now be your responsibility to look after your surviving parent. Being in charge of tasks that previously were done by the one who died can be daunting, both physically and emotionally. Recognizing all the business that you now are expected to take care of can leave you exhausted and overwhelmed.

If This Was Your Second Parent to Die

You have acquired a new title. Now you are an "adult orphan." Although the term orphan is more commonly used in reference to a young child, the fact remains that you now have no living parents. This change may usher in a second identity crisis as you wrestle with the meaning of being the oldest generation in your immediate family.

Your Emotional Inheritance

Consider the traits and life lessons given to you by your parent. What are some of those characteristics, values, and ways of being in the world that you treasure? How will you uphold their ideals or continue to pursue their goals? What do you tell others, who didn't know them as you did, about who your parent was?

Bittersweet Discoveries About Yourself

What are you discovering about yourself as you go through the grief process? Are you stronger or more capable in some areas than you might have anticipated? Of course you would probably prefer to have your parent still alive and NOT be learning these lessons. But given the fact of their death, are there some things that you admire about the way you are handling things?

Mixed Reactions From Others

Since your parent died, you have probably been surprised, both positively and negatively, by the reactions of your friends and co-workers. Have you heard phrases like: “Well, he had a good life,” “At least she isn’t suffering anymore,” “You knew that this would happy one day; now you are free to live your life as you wish” or even “Aren’t you over it yet”? Some people just don’t understand. Yet others may pop out of the woodwork with words of condolence and helpful actions.

Following the Death of Your Parent

- * You may find yourself eager to be around other family members who knew your parent well
- * On the other hand, you may feel apprehensive about being with others and prefer to be somewhere alone where you can grieve privately
- * You may find a sense of comfort in being in their home, or find it hard to walk through the door
- * You may feel relieved in some ways
- * You may find it hard to believe that your parent has died and miss them when you have accomplishments that you long to share with them
- * You may catch yourself daydreaming or unable to concentrate on activities that require your full attention
- * Your friends may not understand why you are having such an intense reaction to your parent’s death and want you to be the same old person you always have been
- * You can anticipate that holidays and family gatherings will stir up intense emotions
- * Your thoughts about the meaning of life may change
- * You may have an acute awareness about the fragility of life
- * You may decide to change your goals, make new choices, and evaluate your priorities

Helpful Actions

- * Let your siblings, friends, and family members know how you are feeling; be available to give and receive support from each other
- * Invite conversations about the memories you have of your parent
- * Set up a memorial space in your home; place flowers or candles, a picture of your parent, a place to write messages or thoughts
- * Give yourself plenty of time to grieve and process your feelings
- * Take good care of yourself and know that your heart is healing in baby steps