

ADULT CHILDREN AND THE LOSS OF A PARENT

The death of any meaningful relationship is painful. A parent is one of our most meaningful relationships, because it is our first. Whether they were a good parent, “bad” parent, a parent who wasn’t there because of a forced separation, or who died at an early age, at one point in time we were a part of them.

In the normal course of events, parents are supposed to die. Therefore, we are supposed to have some kind of natural, built-in intuitive capacity to handle it. Where in the world did we ever get such an idea? Going to kindergarten, going away to college, getting married, all of these “leaving the nest” experiences are talked about, prepared for. Why do we not have the same preparation for the final separation from our parent?

The message that society gives us is: Since the death of a parent is expected, grief that lasts longer than friends or relatives find comfortable is not appropriate. Knowingly or not, we buy into this and, as a result, don’t pay attention to our grief.

What are some things that determine our grief reactions?

ATTACHMENT: How you react to your parent’s death will depend partly on how far you have proceeded in your own development. It goes best if there is a normal development into adulthood on both parts; the child has become an independent adult and the parent has been able to let the child go during the years.

SOCIAL DIMENSION: Our roots are shaken. We have to learn to think of ourselves differently. When my parents died, I “moved up” to the senior rank in my family. After both my parents died, I had a sense of coming into “my own.”

AGE: 20s and 30s – A parent’s death at this time can be disruptive and bewildering. It may be the most intense age for losing a parent.

40s and 50s – This is a time of great family responsibility with children in college. Sometimes the reactions are mixed: relief and sadness. Feelings do not have to be mutually exclusive.

60s – People in their 60s can have a very difficult time because they are feeling old themselves. There is a sense that you are on the edge – you can feel intensely vulnerable.

QUALITY OF THE RELATIONSHIP: The most difficult death to resolve is when reconciliation of a relationship has not happened, and will not happen. To live fully, you cannot become a prisoner of your past or a parent. You have to come to the point where you can “let it go.” This is not easy and it often takes years.

WHAT IS GAINED THROUGH THE LOSS OF A PARENT: In the maturing process, probably the loss of a person is the most important phase. This can be one of the most important experiences in putting life into perspective. We can look forward and help prepare our children for their loss of us.

PRACTICAL THINGS FOR FAMILIES:

- Communication, reconciliation, forgiveness
- Allow everyone in the family to participate in the death process. Don’t shield people from grief. Building memories.

- Document yourself through pictures. Write a journal of your thoughts. It will help you put your own life into perspective and leave a part of yourself for your children.
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