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Surviving the Death of a Parent

The parent-child relationship is often the most important of all human ties. Most people learn how to be in the world through their parents; the feelings and memories run deep. The pain immediately following their death can be intense. You may also find that the death of a parent causes other losses, such as the loss of a grandparent to your children. It is important to remember that there are some things you can do to make your grief more bearable.

Let yourself grieve in your own way and at your own pace. There is no “right way” to mourn. There is also no timetable for grief, no exact moment when you should “feel better” or “get over it.” Grieving is not about “getting over” the death. It is about expressing your sorrow, sharing your memories, and learning how to go forward with your life. With time, you will find that your memories bring more pleasure than pain, and that you still have an ongoing connection with your parent.

Allow yourself to feel. Feeling sad, lonely, and disoriented after the death of a parent is natural. If your parent was ill for a long time before the death, you may feel some relief that their suffering is over, especially if you were responsible for your ill parent's care. If the death was sudden, when the shock wears off you may feel cheated that you didn't have a chance to say goodbye. If your relationship with your parent was conflicted, you may feel anger or guilt about unresolved issues. If this was your second parent to die, you may feel especially distressed; becoming an “adult orphan” can be very painful.

Sometimes the intensity of your emotions can be frightening; you may feel as if you've lost control of your emotions or are “going crazy.” Painful as these feelings can be, they are all part of the natural response to the death of someone loved. Expect ups and downs, and be patient with yourself. The intensity of these feelings will subside over time.

Recognize the death's impact on your entire family. If you have brothers or sisters, the death of your parent will most likely affect them differently than it is affecting you. The death may also stir up family conflicts, such as disagreements about the funeral or arguments about family finances. Or you may find that the death of your parent brings you and your family closer together. If you have young children or teenagers, they will need support as they grieve the loss of their grandparent; if you are too grief-stricken yourself to provide this support, enlist the help of other family members or friends. Finally, when there is a surviving parent, try to understand the death's impact on him or her; the death of a spouse will mean different things to your surviving parent than it does to you.

Take care of yourself. Grief takes an enormous amount of energy, and often disrupts eating and sleeping patterns. Getting regular exercise can help you sleep better and lowers your risk of depression. Try to eat regular, nutritious meals. As best you can, try to get enough sleep. Take naps during the day if you find you can't sleep at night. Lighten your schedule as much as possible, and don't be too hard on yourself when you can't get as much done as you're used to.

Express your grief. Find your own personal style for expressing your grief. If you find that talking helps, seek out people who acknowledge your loss and will listen to you as you express your grief. Or maybe you like to write; consider writing a letter to your parent expressing your thoughts and feelings, or writing in a journal. Some people prefer creative outlets for their grief, exploring and healing through drawing, music, or other artistic expression. Others may choose physical outlets for their grief, such as exercise or gardening.

Find support. Sharing your pain with others won't make it disappear, but it might make it more bearable. Find those who are comfortable listening to you, who encourage you to be yourself, and who can accept all of your feelings without imposing their own ideas of how you should be grieving. Some people find a support group or grief counseling helpful; often just a few sessions can help you feel less alone.

Find peace in your own spiritual process. For some people, religion is exceptionally helpful in the grieving process. However, personal faith does not make one immune to grief, or to the spiritual doubts grief can raise. Find safe avenues to explore your feelings, thoughts and questions. Take spiritual comfort where you can.

Be prepared for holidays and special occasions, especially during the first year. After the loss of a parent, there are certain special days – holidays, anniversaries, birthdays – that may feel particularly painful. Often the anticipation of the day is worse than the day itself – making plans ahead of time for how to spend the day can make it easier to get through. Some people find it helpful to celebrate in a different way than they would have before their parent's death. Some may not feel like celebrating at all, and choose to bow out of family functions, while others find comfort in the company of friends and family. The anniversary of your parent's death may be especially hard; you may find comfort in special rituals, prayers, or other activities that memorialize your parent and celebrate their lives and legacy.

Give yourself time. As much as possible, postpone making major decisions. If circumstances allow, do not move, change jobs, or make any large changes to your life until the intensity of your grief subsides. Don't force yourself to go through your parent's belongings until you are ready. You'll know when you have the energy and desire to face this task. Most importantly, be patient with yourself as you get used to all the changes grief brings.

Remember -- healing doesn't mean forgetting your parent. Your parent, and your relationship with them, will always be a part of you, kept alive in your memories.