

Living Through Grief

Different Bonds, Different Grief

There are different kinds of losses. This issue offers insight into losing a spouse or life partner, losing a parent as an adult, children who are grieving, and the loss of a child or a grandchild. A suggested reading list is also included.

When a Spouse or Life Partner Dies

Few life events are as painful as the death of your spouse or life partner. You may feel uncertain about whether you will survive this overwhelming loss. You may even feel uncertain about whether you have the energy or desire to try to heal.

This was your companion, the person who shared your life. If you are not sure of who you are and feel confused, it is because you have lost a part of yourself. Feeling disorientated is natural when you experience the death of someone you loved, lived with and depended on.

Your grief is special because no one had the same relationship you had with your spouse or partner. As a result, you will grieve in your own special way. Do not compare experience with others, or adopt their expectations about how long your grief should last.

Days and events that held special meaning for you as a couple (such as birthdays, a wedding anniversary, holidays) may be more difficult to go through by yourself. Have a plan for coping before and on the day of a special event.

Losing a Parent as an Adult

Your mother or father died. Whether you had a good, bad or indifferent relationship with the parent who died, your feelings were probably quite strong.

The parent-child bond is perhaps the most fundamental of all human ties. When your mother or father dies, that bond is torn. You may feel many strong emotions due to this loss. You may be surprised at the overwhelming depth of your feelings of loss. If this was your second parent to die, you may feel especially sorrowful.

If you have brothers or sisters, the death of this parent is probably affecting each of you differently. After all, each of you had a unique relationship with the parent, so each will mourn the loss in his or her own way. The death may also stir up sibling disagreements. Recognize that such disagreements are normal.

Finally, when there is a surviving parent, try to understand the impact of the death on him or her. The death of a spouse or partner will probably have a very different meaning for your parent than it does for you.

Children Who Are Grieving

Children grieve. Even before children are able to talk, they grieve when someone they love dies. And these feelings about the death become a part of their lives forever.

Some adults try to spare their children the pain and sadness of loss by not talking about the death. It is important to understand that children will grieve anyway.

Adults who talk openly about the death help children understand that grief is normal when someone they love dies. Children need to know that it is all right to be sad and to cry and the hurt they feel will not last forever.

Patience is needed in responding to children's questions about grief. Responses should be in a language they can understand, and it is not necessary to have all the answers

Children will ask some questions about death over and over again. Repeating questions helps them understand and adjust to their loss.

It is important for children to know that their feelings are accepted. And although some of their behavior may seem inappropriate, it's helpful to realize that this is a stressful time. Try not to judge or criticize them.

Loss of a Child or Grandchild

A terrible thing has happened. Your child died. You are overwhelmed with grief, anger and hurt. You hurt in your heart, body, and mind. You feel as if you have died too. Even simple tasks now become almost too much to do as you try to make sense of what has happened.

Having to go on without your child seems like a cruel trick. You keep asking the questions: "Why me? Why my child?" Consider taking a "moment-to-moment" or "one-day-at-a-time" approach that allows you to grieve at your own pace.

As parents, you have not only lost your child, you have also lost the hopes and dreams you had for your child. The two of you will grieve differently, so it is important to respect each other's right to do what feels best for him or her. Realize your own pain may be so great that you cannot help the other grieve.

The death of a child has been described as the most difficult, painful and time-consuming loss parents can suffer because it is not how life is supposed to be. As parents, you expected your child to outlive you. You may also feel your role was to keep your child safe. You saw yourselves as givers and nurturers of life, so it is difficult for the two of you to experience your child's death. Whatever the circumstances of your child's death, you will need to share your grief with others.

The grandparent-grandchild relationship is a very special one. When a grandchild dies, grandparents grieve too. You not only grieve for your grandchild, but also for the bereaved parents. In fact, the hardest part for you may be the pain you feel for the child's parents. But your own grief may also be very intense. When a child dies, both parents and grandparents lose part of their future.

Suggested Reading List

Children

Aarvy Aardvark Finds Hope
By Donna O'Toole
Mountain Rainbow Publications, 1997

The Fall of Freddie the Leaf
By Leo Buscaglia
Slack Incorporated, 1982

Bereaved Children & Teens
By Earl Grollman
Beacon Press, 1995

Grief Journey
By Mark Scrivani
Hope for the Bereaved, 1996

Bereaved Parents

Bereaved Parent
By Harriet S. Schiff
Penguin Press, 1977

The Bereaved Parent's Survival Guide
By Juliet C. Rothman
Continuum Publishing, 1997

Loss of a Parent

Losing a Parent
By Alexandra Kennedy
Harper San Francisco, 1984

How to Survive the Loss of a Parent
By Lois Anker
William Morrow Publishing, 1993

Widows/Widowers

A Look in the Mirror- A handbook for Widowers
By Edward Ames
Centering Corporation, 1985

What Helped Me When My Loved One Died
Edited by Earl Grollman
Beacon Press, 1981