

Ten Steps to Grieving the Loss of a Parent

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The death of a parent is a life-shaking event for which few are prepared. This experience can wound us deeply, leaving lifetime scars. Or it can, if grieved fully, initiate profound, unprecedented change and open our world into new perspectives and choices. The following steps to grieving the loss of a parent (whether recently or in the past) will tap this transformative potential.

Acknowledge the importance and power of this event. The death of a parent shakes the very foundation of our lives. It is natural, though often uncomfortable, to feel raw and vulnerable, alone, out of control. Rather than resisting the powerful forces activated in grief, learn strategies for moving through it, stage by stage, day by day.

Take time each day to honor your grief. Set up a sanctuary in your home or in nature, a protected place where you can open fully to your grief for ten to twenty minutes every day. Using the sanctuary, gradually you will find a rhythm of entering the grief for a period each day, then letting it go and attending to daily tasks.

Address any unfinished business with your parent. It is very common for unresolved feelings toward your parent to surface after his or her death. The grieving period is an important time to heal these old wounds and begin to say good-bye.

Participate in creating new family patterns. The family system is often thrown into chaos and upheaval after a parent's death. Old patterns don't work with the same predictable results. The family may thrash around for months, seeking a new balance with one another. This is a brief window of opportunity, when the family is opened up to change before a new system is established. You can either be thrown into this new system or consciously participate in creating new patterns that are healthy for you.

Explore the direction and quality of your life. The death of a parent often initiates a period of painful questioning: Where am I going in my life? What do I really value? What are my beliefs? Does my life really matter? This questioning is a critical part of the grieving process. Out of it will come new perspectives, directions and choices.

Don't pressure yourself to "get back to normal". Many expect that grief will be over in a few weeks or months. Grief has its own rhythm, nature and timing that resist our attempts to control it. For some, though certainly not all, there is a marked shift around the first anniversary of your parent's death. However, as the years pass, the grief may well up from time to time. Each time it surfaces, see it as an opportunity for more healing.

Learn to parent yourself. Give yourself nurturance, love, protection and encouragement. Clarify the expectations you had of your parent that he or she never could fulfill. In seeing the relationship for what it was rather than what you wanted it to be, you can grieve what your parent didn't give you and begin to appreciate what he or she did give you. Let your friends know what you want and need from them. Offer them some suggestions of ways that they can help and support you-- perhaps bringing you a meal, doing some errands, giving you a back rub, taking a walk with you, checking in on you regularly. Assert that your need to withdraw. Let him or her know about anything that he or she is doing that is not supportive. Encourage your friends to educate themselves about grief so that they will know what to expect. Remind them that grief takes a long time to heal.

Each year acknowledge the anniversary of your parent's death. Take time to reflect and do something special to commemorate that date. Be gentle with yourself, as this is a vulnerable time in which many may feel depressed or emotional.

Celebrate the changes and new perspectives. These will begin to manifest in your life as you move out of the dark middle phase of grief. When you feel ready, act on new ideas, inspirations and insights.