

Helping the Surviving Parent Grieve

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Basics

It's never easy to console someone whose spouse has died, but it can be especially challenging when the deceased is your parent. How can you comfort your surviving parent while dealing with your own loss?

It may help you to remember that every person experiences grief differently, and that losing a spouse isn't the same thing as losing a parent. You shouldn't assume that you know exactly how your father feels. Try to be understanding and patient. You can help him by:

- Attending to his physical needs
- Listening to him and encouraging him to talk about your mother
- Making sure he gets the care he needs
- Patiently allowing him to express his grief
- Remembering and acknowledging important dates and anniversaries

It's not always easy to do these things, however. And because you have to deal with your own loss, you may be frustrated as you try to help your father move on with his life. As part of his grieving, he may experience depression, forgetfulness, disorganization, preoccupation with the loss and a lack of interest or motivation in activities that he used to enjoy.

Or maybe you're having trouble letting go, and you resent the fact that your father has given away your mother's clothes. In either case, tensions may be driving you apart, at a time when support is most needed.

In addition to support and time to mourn, both you and your surviving parent need plenty of rest, nutritious meals and exercise. Try to make sure you both get these things. Staying healthy will help your body handle the stress these emotions can cause.

Key Tip 1

In time, grief will diminish, although it sometimes takes a year or longer. One of the best gifts you can give your mother is patience and understanding, long past the time when the outside world has stopped sending cards or asking her how she's doing.

Key Tip 2

Sometimes grief is delayed. Your father may have suffered a long illness, requiring your mother's constant care and attention. Initially, she may remain caught up in taking care of the details after his death, or may deny that she's grieving (because the death was expected). She may seem fine for weeks or even months. But you should be prepared for her grief to surface at some point.

Key Tip 3

Grief is stressful, and stress impairs the immune system. Grieving people may have more colds, suffer lingering illnesses or have flare-ups of existing conditions. You might suggest that your mother make an appointment with her physician so he can keep a check on her health. Make sure the doctor knows about her bereavement.

Specifics

Grief can be a jumble of contradictory emotions: anger, longing, relief, guilt, regret, depression, panic and even hysteria.

Some days, your father may seem almost like his old self. But then he may hear a song, find a note written by his wife or pass a favorite restaurant and fall back in the throes of grief. These aren't setbacks -- they're just typical ways that the grieving process resurfaces.

Understanding Your Parent's Grief

A grieving person can't function at 100 percent, so the initial months after your mother's death aren't a time for your father to start new projects or make major decisions. His normal functions will return, even though you may find him doing abnormal things. Such behavior isn't surprising; he's grieving. Signs of grief include:

- **Forgetfulness.** Your usually organized father may miss appointments, lock his keys in the car or mail unsigned checks with his bills. You can help him by being patient, reminding him that these are symptoms of grief and suggesting that he write down reminders to himself.
- **Disorganization.** Your father may find that it takes a lot longer to finish everyday tasks. He may not manage his time well -- leaving one project unfinished and going on to something else. You might help him plan a schedule, or offer to work with him. Spending time together and focusing on something other than the grief can bring you closer together, as well as ease his sense of isolation and loneliness.
- **Inability to concentrate.** During the early stages of bereavement, the mind wanders. Your newly widowed father may find it impossible to stay focused. It may be difficult for him to read a book or even to stick with a TV show. Reading a newspaper may take longer than before, and retaining information may be difficult. You can help by highlighting important points, or even reading aloud with him. Bereaved people can be dangerous on the highways due to their inability to concentrate. They're also susceptible to unexpected crying spells. Warn your father to be extra careful when driving or handling potentially dangerous equipment, such as a lawn mower or even a garbage disposal in a sink.
- **Lack of interest or motivation.** Your father might say: "Why work so hard? We just die anyway" or "I was doing all this for your mother, and now she's dead. Why bother?" Let him express his feelings, and offer him love and support. But if you worry that he might actually hurt himself, or if you notice him dealing with his sadness by using alcohol or drugs, talk to his physician immediately.

Helping Out

Physical health

Grief is physically exhausting. It can actually make someone ill. So if your mother's grief seems to be hurting her health, make sure her doctor knows about her loss so he can help monitor her condition if necessary.

You can also help by making sure your mother eats regular, nourishing meals. If it's too difficult for her to eat three regular meals each day, suggest that she try four or five small ones. And see that she has nutritious snacks, too.

Help her get regular exercise. If you live nearby, visit in the evenings for walks around the neighborhood after dinner. Or, if you're far away, ask one of her friends or neighbors to walk with her.

In addition to the exhaustion brought on by grief, your mother may be having problems sleeping. Help her think about developing regular bedtime routines, and ask family and friends not to call her after her designated bedtime. Meditation may also help her get the rest she needs. If her sleep problems persist, she should see her doctor.

Emotional health

You may find your mother is more likely to snap at you or others. Minor issues may spark major arguments. Be understanding and patient; remember that she probably isn't really angry with you, she's just angry that your father has died. If she's receptive, you might look for a support group for people who have lost spouses. If she belongs to a religious or community organization, encourage her to attend services or meetings as much as she's able and to stay in contact with her fellow members.

The mourning period

The length of the mourning period will be influenced by your mother's personality, her feelings about your father, and even the cause of death. If your father died unexpectedly, your mother probably didn't have a chance to say goodbye and may now have to look for a symbolic way to do so. You might suggest that she write a letter to your father or read to him at his burial site.

And no matter how well your mother has dealt with her grief, emotions often resurface at holidays, birthdays and anniversaries. It's important to acknowledge and share this emotion. For example, let your mother know you remember her wedding anniversary and ask if you can do something special for her, such as taking her out for dinner. Be understanding if she doesn't want to do anything or wants you to stay home with her.

Taking Care of Yourself

A lot of responsibilities are thrust upon adult children whose parents die. They may be expected to make funeral arrangements, do all the paperwork or start caring for surviving parents.

However, it's important that you take time for your own grief. You might want to join a support group. You should also let your friends and other family members know what your needs are: Do you need to talk? Blow off steam about your surviving parent?

As you watch out for your parent, don't forget your own daily health routines. You should eat well, exercise and get plenty of sleep. And make sure your doctor knows what's happened so she can help monitor your health if necessary. Finally, remember that in addition to your grief, you may also be facing feelings about your own aging and death. The death of a parent brings us face to face with our own mortality, and reminds us that we're no longer children. This adjustment can be difficult.

Express your feelings appropriately, and encourage your parent to do the same. You may both feel better after a good cry -- especially if you've shared your tears. You might also seek professional guidance. If your emotions are overwhelming, consider seeing a licensed therapist who specializes in grief.

Frequently Asked Questions

My mother died two years ago, but my father refuses to clean out her closet or make any changes in the house. Should I encourage him to start getting rid of some of her things?

Spending time in your mother's room may have become a comforting ritual for your dad. He may need your encouragement (and even permission) to begin making changes. You might try saying something like, "When you're ready, I'd be happy to help you clean out Mom's closet" or "When you're ready, I'd like to have some of Mom's jewelry or sweaters." If your suggestion makes him angry, he might need professional counseling.

Since my dad died last year, it seems that no one wants to talk about him, especially my mother. Whenever I bring up his name or talk about his death, family members leave the room or change the subject. I need to talk about him. What should I do?

Talking about your father's death may not be the place to start -- instead, try talking about memories casually. For example: "Remember when we went on our family vacation and Dad fell into the swimming pool?" Or get out a box of family photos and go through them yourself. Your mother might get curious and join you. You might also suggest to your family that perhaps you join a support group together -- and if they don't want to, consider joining one on your own.

My father died six months ago and my mother's already dating. I want my mother to be happy, but I don't like this guy and I worry he'll take advantage of her. I feel I owe it to my father to protect her. What can I do?

It's possible that the man your mother's dating is a fine, loving person. However, because it's only been six months since your father died, you're right to wonder if she's using this relationship to ease her loneliness and grief. Try to get to know him. Remember, your mother can make her own decisions. But it's okay if you suggest that she go slowly in this new relationship, and consider joining a support group.

My parents had been married for 45 years before my mother died of a long illness, and now all Dad can talk about is "joining your mother." I need my father and don't want him to die anytime soon. What's going on with Dad?

It's common to hear people talk about the time when they'll be able to join a loved one who's died. Usually it's a passing comment. But if you feel your father may be thinking about killing himself, you should act immediately, especially if he's had periods of depression. Ask him about how serious he is. Encourage him to see a therapist. Many communities have suicide hotlines or mental health centers where you can get immediate advice.

After my father died nine months ago, I helped out constantly, dealt with all the paperwork and spent nights at my mother's home. Now I have to get on with my own life, but my mother can't function without me. How can I help her become more independent?

Before your father died, was your mother dependent on him? If so, she may be trying to replace him with you. Some counseling might be in order. If she refuses to go, you could go alone. If she's always been independent, you might start by asking her about this change. Her increased dependence may simply be a temporary reaction to your father's death; she may just need more time to get back on her feet.