

Losing a Parent as an Adult

Maybe you just called mom or dad yesterday for advice. Or maybe you haven't spoken to them in a while. Maybe you live far away or perhaps you live nearby. Regardless, there is a certain level of comfort in knowing our parent is there to help us if we need them. When they die, we have lost someone and something special: the person who guided us our whole life, who shaped our values and helped us figure out who we are in the world.

While we might be more deeply affected if a parent dies when we are young and attachment is strong, when we marry, and raise our own families, we begin to see what our parents might have gone through in raising us. We can identify with them more than we did in our youth, when we did not have those experiences and responsibilities. As we see our parents age, we start to think about our own mortality. We may have dealt with the difficult decision of placing a parent in care outside their own home. Whether we care for them in their home, our home or, in their best interests, secure a placement for them in a professional setting, it is hard to watch how conditions like dementia, Alzheimer's disease, stroke or senility affect them psychologically and socially. Please visit them regularly. Although they may not know us, we know them.

When a parent dies, we may be relieved they are not suffering anymore. If they have been ill for a long time, we may have expected they don't have a lot of time left. Maybe we have experienced some anticipatory grief already, so the shock is not as great as if the death were sudden or traumatic. Still, we feel the loss. While we may think we are prepared cognitively for the loss, emotionally, we are never prepared. No matter how old we are, we are still our parent's child.

The love our parents give us can never be replaced. They knew us in a way no-one else ever will. Parents are the keepers of all the stories of what we did through our growing up years. Perhaps they have become trusted friends. When they die, that lifelong relationship is lost. If we have children of our own, they will also feel the loss of the love and wisdom our parents gave to them.

We may have wonderful or not so wonderful memories of our parent. If they were difficult, we may have unpleasant memories we need to work through, and our grief journey may take longer. We may need to work through guilt or blame assigned to us, either by ourselves or our parent, which we don't deserve, and find a way to let it go.

With the death of one parent, we may assume more responsibility for the remaining parent. As adult children, we tend to rally around our mom or dad when they lose their spouse, focusing on them and their needs. We may fear we will soon lose them, too. The remaining parent will need extra affection and attention at such a time, even if they deny it. We know that grief is exhausting and for the parent who has lost their life-long partner, this may be the most difficult time of their lives.

When a parent dies, we may assume more responsibility within our family circle. If this is the loss of our second parent, we feel like an orphan, no matter how old we are. This is normal. When both of our parents have passed on we have lost what are, for us,

the most important members of that generation. We have now moved up a generation. We have lost our role models and, suddenly, we are the one people look to now. This may feel overwhelming.

Even as we take on new roles and responsibilities, and support others in our families as they grieve, remember that we have our own grief too. The death of a parent is a huge and special loss. Be as gentle and patient with yourself as you are able, remembering that each of us is unique in our grief, and there is no timetable. Remember to take good care of yourself as you care for others, and honor the needs of your own heart.

Remember that Niagara Hospice bereavement supports are always available to you as needed. It would be our honor to be of service to you. Feel free to call us anytime.

Reference: Sanders, Dr. Catherine M. (1992) *Surviving Grief and Learning to Live Again*.