

Name

**When Your Parent has Died**

***by Sherry Williams White***

Everyone knows that they will have to bury their parents one day. Knowing this fact and living this reality are two totally different things. When a parent dies, all the bonds you had with your childhood feel like they have been broken. Even if you are an adult and have children of your own, the death of a parent can shatter your sense of safety and security. You realize for the first time that there is now nothing standing between you and death. You have become the next generation. The person who was always there or was always supposed to be there to protect you and give you advice is gone. You now become the protector and defender of your own life. You literally become an adult by experiencing the death of a parent and possibly fear losing the child that is inside you.

The concept of family and the roles your parents filled must now be taken on by someone else. Sometimes determining just who that person is will create added stress. Who will become the social planner for the family and what can you do if you are now all alone?

The experiences of grief will vary depending upon the circumstances of the death, your age, whether there is a surviving parent and the health of the surviving parent. Your own life situation, whether you have siblings or are an only child will also impact your grief journey.

So, what can you do?

First it is important to allow yourself to express and experience all of the feelings that accompany grief. Grief is the natural and normal reaction to the death of your loved one. You don't have to be strong or play the martyr just because you're an adult. There are many feelings and emotions such as love, anger, frustration, loneliness and guilt that are all a part of grief.

You may experience sleep irregularities, changes in appetite, upset stomach, restlessness or feelings of emptiness. These feelings can be overwhelming and confusing. You may feel numb and exhausted. You may not be able to concentrate and fear that you are losing your mind. Tears, whether they are outside or inside, are not a sign of weakness. They are the price people pay for loving someone. Be compassionate with yourself. Take care of yourself. It is important to get at least 6-8 hours of rest or sleep daily. Be sure to limit your caffeine consumption. Do not turn to alcohol or drugs to numb your pain, they can only provide temporary relief. If you allow yourself to experience the pain, you make room for the memories and love you shared.

How do I relate to my surviving parent?

If you have a surviving parent, you may find yourself acting more like the parent and less like the child. It is normal to jump into the role of caretaker. Your parent may look to you for guidance and support. But be careful not to take away independence, unless it is necessary for health and safety reasons. In fact, you need to focus on activities that will foster independence and give your surviving parent a sense of control.

Try to find a common bond between you and the surviving parent by discovering needs that you can both fulfill for each other. If you find this impossible or find yourself feeling angry with the surviving parent, realize that this is okay and forgive yourself for these feelings. Your forgiveness may help you better deal with your surviving parent.

What if your surviving parent needs extra care?

If the surviving parent is elderly or needs extra care, be aware that you are facing two major life changes—the death of one parent and the care of the other. You may find yourself needing to consider a retirement center or nursing home. Try not to overwhelm yourself by feeling guilty. If this can not be avoided, look to your siblings or other family and friends for support. Make decisions based on information and fact rather than on emotional considerations. Remember the physical well-being of everyone involved must be considered. Take your time, gather the facts and trust your decision.

What about my brothers and sisters?

Whether your family was large or small, your relationship with your siblings will be as different as you are in personalities. Try to accept those differences and support one another. If you find yourself bickering, remember that you are all trying to gain control over a situation you have no control over. Give each other some space. Consider giving everyone a task so each person has their own little piece of the puzzle to work on to put the family picture back together again, even if it will look different.

Remember that grief is different for every one. Don't try to measure your family's grief by your own. Everyone had a different relationship with the parent who died, so you are all grieving different things. Your grief and their grief are different. No one is right or wrong. Acknowledge those differences and don't use them as weapons against one another. Be patient with each other.

Try to look at each other as individuals first. Remember that being brothers and sisters is a matter of circumstance. If you can remember these two things, you may be surprised how your perspective changes. Maybe you can even laugh at yourselves. Laughter is healing and it brings people together.

What can I do if I'm all alone?

If you are an only child and both parents have died, you may experience feelings of isolation, emptiness and despair. You may be asking yourself, "Where do I belong now?" This may make you feel frightened and all alone.

Reach out to others. Involve yourself in your community. You will find that by helping others, you help yourself. Many people have found a new identity and a new lease on life by volunteering. There are many people around who could use your love, your compassion and your company.

Many famous people have said they never really grew up until their parents died. You don't have to be famous to understand those feelings. Parents bring their children into the world and leave them many gifts. They gave you wisdom to pass down to your children or others close to you. Death is not their final gift, but it is the passing of generations and the beginning of a new wisdom about life and about yourself. The greatest tribute you can pay to your parents is what you do with your life.