
When Your Adult Child Dies

The Journey Through Grief



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Written for The Compassionate Friends

When Your Adult Child Dies

*Dedicated to each bereaved parent who has walked
this lonely road with me and to our precious
children who live forever in our hearts*

The Journey Through Grief

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The Beginning

The death of your adult child will probably be the defining moment in your life. Sadness, anxiety and pain shred your mind and body.

When you realized your child had died, shock instantly and mercifully shielded you. As this shock wears off, the full extent of your loss is gradually revealed to you. The pain ravages your body, mind and spirit. You cannot control it; you are a tiny branch at the mercy of an immense waterfall, pummeled by emotions of sadness and the deepest loss. Your body aches with the pain of your child's death. You think of your child's life, you live in the past and you weep about the future.



Because your child was an adult when death occurred, your memories include many years together. This can be a blessing for you and your family. This can also bring many complications to your grief journey. Depending on the age of your child and the adult commitments and relationships which your child had in life, you may be distanced by time and logistics from your child's recent years of life.

The fabric of your child's life from birth until death is interwoven with yours over a lengthy period of time. The circle of life has been broken; the void that remains can become overwhelming. But the memories of many years, the experience of knowing your child as an adult and the understanding of what formed the core of your child will one day bring you a sense of peace. But one day is not this day. Today you begin a grief journey that is unlike any other.

Expect the Unexpected

The unexpected emotions that you will experience on your grief journey will sometimes cause you to doubt your sanity. Bereaved parents may move from sadness to anger to guilt and to fear. Bereaved parents of adult children are often expected by society to ease back into life more quickly than parents who have lost young children. This is nonsense. Ignore the expectations of others. This pain is so intense that wondering what others expect will be meaningless as you deal with the multitude of emotions that are now your constant companions.



Extreme, numbing sadness is normal when one loses a child of any age. On some days you won't be able to stop crying. On other days you will find tears silently streaming down your cheeks at the most inappropriate of times. You need this emotional release. This is your body, mind and soul leading you through the grieving process. For the first five to seven months, don't even try to stop the process. Keep your schedule light, your commitments down to just a few. Spend time with people who understand your grief... people who won't try to stop you from crying. You must cry, you must weep, you must wail at the injustice of this horrific loss. This, too, is part of the process.

When you begin the process of returning to your old routines such as work, shopping and other activities, don't be surprised if deep sorrow sweeps over you at unexpected times. This is a normal part of the grieving process. There are no shortcuts.

Negative Feelings

As time begins to slowly pass, you will find new feelings relentlessly gripping you. You may experience guilt, anger, fear, anxiety, depression. There are reasons for each of these feelings. These are normal in moderation.

Remember that many of these feelings are irrational ones. We have lost our child, the person to whom we always gave unconditional love. Our child is a part of us; the age of our child at the time of death does not matter. The bond is a ours for a lifetime. To feel anger at others and oneself, to feel guilty and to project guilt onto others, to know anxiety, fear and deep depression are all common. Extremes in any of these emotions may indicate a need for professional counseling. Do not ignore extreme and protracted negative feelings as these are counter-productive to the grief process.

Many grief resources are available to you. Support groups, private counseling, reading materials, audio and visual presentations can be helpful during this first year. These help us to understand that negative feelings and emotions are normal following the death of our child. If you choose a support group such as The Compassionate Friends, don't make a quick judgment. Attend at least three meetings before you decide whether this is for you. Some people choose a religious counselor, others turn to family members or a private counselor. Follow your heart.



A Different Type of Grief Process

Several elements of the grief process for parents who have lost their adult child are unique. Since your child was grown and was probably living away from your home, people will frequently think or say that the pain won't be so



bad because your child wasn't a part of your daily life. This is, of course, not true. Often, if there is a spouse or children, you may find that you will be expected to be strong, even tough, during the grief process. If you attempt to do this, your grief process will be delayed until you stop posturing and start dealing with this ultimate loss.

Because men and women often grieve differently, there can be conflicts within the marriage. Each spouse must acknowledge that the other is handling the grief process in a fashion that is most comfortable. Efforts to help each other are often rebuked by both men and women. This is common. Give yourselves time to adapt to your new reality and the new dynamics of your relationship.

As one mother commented, "I feel like I am grieving many children: my child as a baby, a toddler, a youngster, a teenager and an adult." The longer your child lived, the more memories you have to grieve. The comfort of this fact is that these same memories bring you happiness, too.

Finally, although your child was "grown", that precious life was cut short. As others' children complete their education, get married, have children, start their careers, build their future, you may think that this is where your child should be right now. Those thoughts could become permanent comparisons or could pass as the years soften the pain of your child's death. No matter the age of your child at the time of death, there is always an uncompleted life.

Talking About Your Child

Many memories of your child's life will begin to flood your mind once you have moved beyond the initial shock and bargaining stages of your loss. This is the time to talk about your child and shed tears about the precious life that no longer graces this plane. Your child lived, loved, laughed and experienced accomplishments and setbacks throughout his or her life. Talk about your child's personality, your relationship, your child's dreams and your loss. If your adult child had children, and you are able to spend time with them, consider sharing stories about your child's life with them. They will be very good listeners; their parent is gone and only you can bring to life the moments of their absent parent's childhood.



The Compassionate Friends provides an opportunity to talk about your child. In this confidential environment, you can share elements of your deep emotions as well. You can speak of your regrets, your happiest times and your child's role in your life. Your child's name will again be spoken by others. Talk with family members who knew your child throughout the early and adult years. Often they will remind you of events that you had forgotten. Talk with friends about your child. During the early grieving process, limit time spent with friends or family who are not comfortable talking about your child.

Do not think that never mentioning your child's name again will ease your pain. Your child's life was real. This is the time to acknowledge your child's life and the deep void you feel in this terrible loss.

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Some Days Are Overwhelming

For the first year or maybe longer, you will find that there are times when the pain is sudden and overwhelming. This, too, is normal. As your mind adjusts to your "new reality" without your child, you are often jolted by the finality and unfairness of this terrible loss. Others seem to be moving forward very quickly....your adult child's friends, siblings, love interest, spouse, even your grandchildren....these lives appear to be normal while your life is a roller coaster of emotions and pain.



This is a normal, and often accurate, feeling that parents have. A perfectly good day is suddenly darker than a moonless night as your emotions take over. Parents grieve very deeply as their loss is unique; it is out of sequence. Our children are supposed to bury us; no one should ever have to bury a child. Yet your child has died.

Suddenly you are thrust back to the emotions of your initial grief. This happens less and less frequently as the mind accepts the loss of our child over time. There is no set length of time when bereaved parents feel that they have moved towards hope and peace. We are all different. Our reactions are different and our pace of grief is different. Setbacks are common. It is best to acknowledge the bad days and let your grief sweep over you.

When your sadness becomes a constant shadow of serious depression, it is probably time to seek professional help. Many bereaved parents have found comfort with private counseling when life gets overwhelming. In fact, it is quite common for bereaved parents to seek counseling with a professional early in the grieving process.

The First Year

This is not an easy journey that we take following the death of our adult child. The loss of our child is the most traumatic and painful event that most of us will ever endure. The journey through grief will be relentless, sometimes overwhelming and initially filled with extreme sadness. This journey will be marked with many firsts: all holidays, all birthdays, especially your child's birthday, all special events and finally, the first death anniversary.

When losing an adult child to death, many of us find that our evolving and maturing relationship with our child has been enhanced as a deep and abiding friendship. Be open about your feelings, be honest about expectations. You are not going to be the rock. You are going to be a person hurled onto the emotional rocks by a great ocean of grief. Acknowledge this.



Find materials to read which help to answer some of your personal questions about grief. Attend grief seminars. Consider journaling your thoughts and emotions. Join a chapter of The Compassionate Friends. While many expect us, the parents of adult children, to keep ourselves together, we know that we won't be able to do so. Don't try to be the rock for everyone else. Do what you can for them. But remember to take care of yourself, be gentle with yourself and let your grief take you where it will. Isolate yourself from external negativity.

During the first year you will experience much. When you begin looking back, you will realize that the pain has become less raw and that you are moving toward hope.

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Resolution

There is rarely one moment of clarity when we see the bright light of hope and resolution. Resolution comes in small increments. Grief work is hard; grief work when you have lost your adult child is the hardest work you will ever do. But the pain does become less acute, the sadness lingers but not so bitterly, and the denial, anger, guilt and other negative emotions recede into the background of your mind. One day you will realize that you have gone 24 hours without crying. Then a time will come when you will find yourself laughing.

You will begin to consider ways to memorialize your child, to honor your child's life. You will refocus your life in ways you had never envisioned. You will find purpose. You will learn to keep your child in your heart as you complete your life journey. You will prioritize differently, shed some old acquaintances, find some new friends and learn different ways of living your life.

But you will never forget your child. One day you will remember the good times with your child. You will be focused on your child's life, not on your child's death. It is at this point that we realize that hope, peace and



resolution are not only possible but very probable. The time it takes to get to this place differs with each parent. This is not a race. Some linger longer in grief than others. Some parents experience deep, clinical depression. Your journey through grief is as unique as your child's life. It may take several years and some hard work, but you will find your way. Continue moving toward hope and resolution.

Strange Words Of Welcome

I am always amazed at the instant empathy we each feel as new members come to their first meeting. We have the strangest welcome for these parents: "We are so sorry you have to be here."

In other organizations the questions are probing: where did you go to school, where do you work, where do you live? All designed to "size up" the newcomer, put him or her in the proper perspective of a neatly ordered world. For us, this information is meaningless. We know the world isn't neat and orderly; we discovered that when we lost our children. We care about you, the newly bereaved parent, whose life was tossed into a cosmic blender



when your child died. We care because we are you. We have been here a while, in this purgatory of pain. We have learned to live our lives in a different way, to place value on understanding and hope, the intangibles of the purest meanings of life. We have learned to value each other, to reach out and talk, to wait patiently during the silences needed to form thoughts. We listen intently as you quietly say your child's name, tell your child's story, speak of your heartbreak.

Yes, this is a different kind of welcome. But it is the most deeply sincere welcome we will ever receive. We are kindred souls, you and I. Each of us lives in the "after death" world of losing our child. Each of us has learned gradually that the hope we have attained has made life better, lessened the pain, moderated the isolation, tears, emotional devastation and pure mayhem that once overtook us. Each of us has learned this slowly, in our own time and in our own way.

Each month new parents who have suffered the most horrific loss that a human can endure are welcomed into our group. We reach out, we listen with our hearts and we remember.

*Annette Mennen Baldwin
In memory of my son, Todd Mennen
TCF, Katy, TX*

Resources

The Compassionate Friends.....877-969-0010
www.compassionatefriends.org

"We Need Not Walk Alone"

A magazine for bereaved parents published by TCF

Local Compassionate Friends Chapter Library

Many resources specifically created for bereaved parents.

Healing the Grieving Heart Radio Programs

Dr. Gloria Horsley, bereaved parent, addresses many topics of grief with guest hosts and hostesses. Live on Thursdays through TCF website. Archived programs on the TCF website

Centering Corporation.....866-218-0101

Books, T-Shirts, music, videos, collectibles for grieving parents and siblings. Free freight to members of a Compassionate Friends Chapter.

Log on through the Compassionate Friends Website or call for a catalog.

Books

Facing the Ultimate Loss: Coping with the Death of a Child

Beyond Tears

First You Die

Swallowed By A Snake

For Better or Worse

Grief's Journey.....When A Child Dies



Take Care Of Yourself

During the first one to two years following the death of your child, life will sometimes seem overwhelming to you. Here are some thoughts from other parents who have lost a child.

- Drink plenty of water
- Do deep breathing exercises and gentle stretching exercises
- Eat balanced meals, avoid heavy foods
- Avoid alcohol if at all possible
- Seek counseling if your depression is too deep to handle
- Exercise moderately on a daily basis...walking is good
- If you attend a church, talk regularly with your clergyman
- Avoid violent movies and television shows
- Avoid loud environments
- Avoid negative people and negative situations when possible
- Avoid stressful situations whenever possible
- Find escapes from your daily routine such as old movies
- Attend Support Group Meetings
- Plan simply for holidays and special occasions
- Attend appropriate grief seminars
- Talk about your child with friends and family
- Consider keeping a daily or weekly journal of your thoughts
- Try to avoid making any important decisions for the first year
- Don't attempt to stifle your urge to cry...crying is good
- When you are ready, read and listen to grief information
- Do enough physical work to be tired by day's end
- Try to redirect your anger... screaming into a pillow can help
- Be honest with friends and family about your feelings
- Consider journaling your thoughts and feelings
- Listen for the intention of words offered in comfort
- Spend some time in quiet solitude in the country or in a park
- Be very, very gentle with yourself



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