

Navigating the Death of a Parent as an Older Adult

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Experiencing grief of a parent looks different for each person.



-Feeling the emotional and physical pain of the loss of a parent can be experienced and expressed differently, such as “feeling removed from life” and navigating how a regular routine might be continued in the family.

-Anxiousness might increase from coping with the loss of a parent, but also gaining the dependency of the surviving parent and added responsibilities.

COPING WITH GRIEF



What's “normal” with grief as an adult?

Emotionally/Mentally:

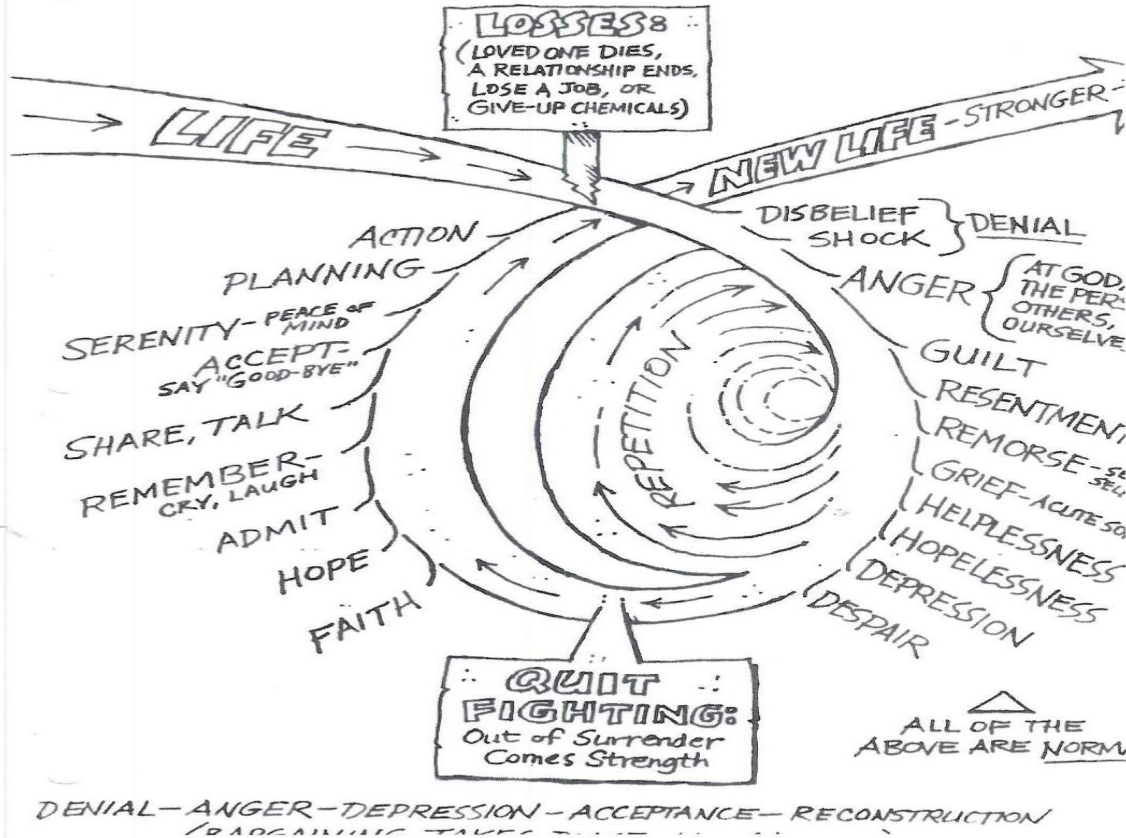
- Experiencing grieving at times more than others
- Feeling overwhelmed and stressed
- Feeling distant from others and family
- Struggling with emotional and behavioral regulation
- Loss of desire to socialize with others
- Struggling to maintain relationships with family

Physically:

- Lack of sleep
- Lack of energy
- Loss of appetite
- Overeating
- Loss of focus on tasks

The Loss Cycle

The Normal Cycle for All Losses...



No matter the relationship of the person lost, the surviving person still experiences grief, loss, and changes.

Stages of grief experienced with losing a loved one

*Loss can be experienced in various stages and encounters, these are among the common experiences

1. **Denial** - not being able to accept that a loss is real; unable to process that someone is gone; natural defence mechanism to help you cope with the extreme emotions of grief
2. **Anger** - feeling angry at the world, God, themselves, or even at the loved one for leaving
3. **Bargaining** - wishing, praying, or hoping that a loved one will be saved in exchange for something, usually changing of behaviour by a person to “bring back the person”
4. **Depression** - when reality hits and starts to face the prospect of life without a person
5. **Acceptance** - comes from working through the disbelief, the anger, the sadness, and reaching a place where you understand your loss is real

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What are some challenges while grieving?

-Emotional pain lingers, but usually improves as time passes. Adults might struggle to voice their emotions and feelings as this tends to defy their generational norms. This can alter family functioning after a parent has died.

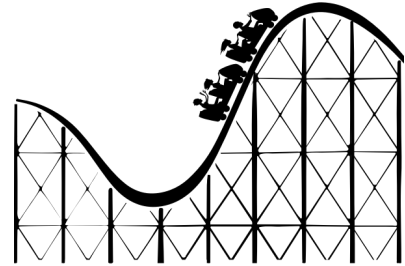
-Adapting to an altered lifestyle is hard, especially for an adult child who now has to adopt the role of taking care of their surviving parent and family.

These adaptations and feelings can often feel overwhelming- described as looking at a blank state and not knowing where to start.

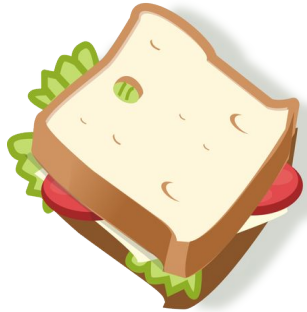


Other challenges while grieving

- The process of grieving and coping can feel like a rollercoaster of experiences and emotions.
- Accessing support and resources can become a challenge due to physical and/or technology limitations of the widowed parent.
- Many tough decisions have to be made while/after a family member has died. It's helpful to make gradual changes compared to several sudden big changes, such as selling estates, the house, leaving a job, or moving to a new location. As the caregiver of a parent, being mindful to make slow changes is helpful.



Sandwich Generation



The “sandwich generation” is considered the adults of mid-life age who are raising dependent children and caring for their adult parents at the same time, who are also mostly dependent.

Meaning, they’re stuck with dependency from both ends of the generation spectrum.

While this combination of dependants (parents and children) is not ideal for families, it is common for an adult to have one or more parent(s) depending on care while also having young adult children who are still partly dependent for care.

Stuck in the Sandwich

The child of the widowed parent might struggle in unique ways and feel stretched between various directions:

- Internally- to process and navigate the loss of their parent and relationship shared
- Outwardly- to embrace new responsibilities of taking care of the surviving parent
- Family- managing the roles of being a parent and partner within the household
- Dividing the work of dependency between the children and parent
- Adjusting to becoming a caregiver to an additional person- the widowed parent



Changes in Family Functioning: supporting the widowed parent

When a couple is separated due to a death, they tend to also lose their caregiver- the sole person who they could depend on for consistent support and companionship.

- Change in routines
- Changes in traditional practices
- Dependency on the adult child as the new caregiver might be increased
- Possible relocation to be near child/caregiver might be helpful for the widowed parent
- It may feel as if there's a void in the space for family as each member grieves differently
- Emotions and feelings might be expressed more than prior to the loss
- Unity or division might arise, altering relationships and practices

Secondary Losses to Consider

Secondary losses occur when there has been a primary loss, such as the loss of a parent within a family. It stems from the primary loss, but can still be significant.

Examples include loss of:

- Chosen lifestyle or routine
- Self awareness
- Family traditions and livelihood
- Feeling of security or safety
- Homeland
- Financial security
- Culture
- Health
- Happiness, peace, and closure



Adjustments as the child/caregiver of a widowed parent

Managing Tasks:

Learning to fulfill the tasks of a bereaved parent might include making meals, grocery shopping, paying bills, driving, laundry, yardwork, house maintenance, and many other daily tasks.

As a caregiver, adding these tasks can increase daily responsibilities, which also might increase stress.

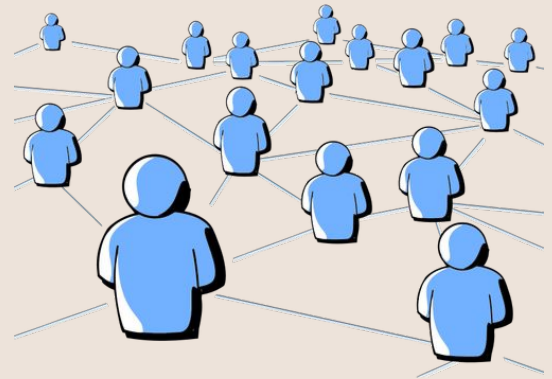


Adjustments as the child/caregiver of a widowed parent

Socialization:

If the bereaved parent was the outgoing social butterfly of the couple, the surviving partner might lose interest and influence to participate in social events.

Increase in lack of companionship and loneliness can result in depression and emotional health risks. As a caregiver, encourage healthy interactions and activities



Roles Reversed: child takes care of parent

Caretaker:

If the bereaved partner was the primary caretaker of the family, there will be a change in family functioning and dynamic.

Often, the adult's child(ren) take responsibility and help the widowed parent.

Health:

The surviving parent might also experience a decline in health because of the gap of care from dependency on their partner and the stress of the death.

Wellness checks become common for the surviving partner, who is adjusting to living alone. Often times, the adult child(ren) visit their parent to insure safety.

What can you encourage to help a parent cope with the death of their partner?

- Journal your thoughts and personal goals, identify people within your support system who can help
- Go for a walk around the neighborhood, local park, or nearby mall
- Go to the local library, maybe join a book club or volunteer there
- Try an exercise class suited for your age population and interests
- Join a class or group at a local senior group or recreation center
- Volunteer at a local organization, hospital, or school community
- Visit places and activities where you and your loved one made memories



How to Heal- Where to start

- Determine how you're grieving. How does it affect your family? What does it look like for you, individually?
- Are you stuck in a "sandwich generation"? How does that impact you?
- Identify your support system. How can you express your feelings and needs to someone for help?
- Determine the changes after the loss of a parent. What can you control?
- Decide daily activities to take care of yourself while grieving. What activities can you include your family?
- Identify your strengths and how those can be used to help cope.

Remember- Grieving is a process. It's important to grieve at your own pace, but to get help when needed.

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