When a parent dies

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When your parent dies, you may believe that since you are an adult, you should not experience extreme grief. After all, many people bury a parent every year. By this time of your life you may have had other deaths in your family.

You may have experienced loss of friends, co-workers or a child. You might feel that you no longer need parenting and may have even been a caregiver for your parent. Yet the death of a parent can have a surprising and strong impact on you.

The end of an era

- The loss of a parent is the end of an era in your family history. You not only lose your parent, you lose:
  - An important relationship
  - Your family structure
  - Your ideas of what the future would be
  - The feeling that he or she would always be there for you
  - Your peace of mind

For at least a short time, you may have:

- Feelings that you were abandoned or orphaned
- Thoughts of earlier times that you regret or resent
- Changes in family dynamics such as shifting roles or more conflict
- Angry, disappointed, frustrated or unfocused thoughts
- Friction with others who may not grieve with you or in the same way

If you were a caregiver

If you were your parent’s caregiver, you may feel relief. You may be glad that your parent is no longer suffering and you’re free from the burden of caregiving. You might feel guilty about feeling relief. But remember that caregiving is very difficult and exhausting. Fatigue changes grief. In addition, your caregiver role has ended, which can add to the sense of abrupt change.

Caring for your surviving parent

If you have a surviving parent, you may feel that their grief is more important than yours. The desire to give emotional support may delay your time of grief. You may be able to put off your grief for a while, but in time you will also grieve. It’s important to take care of yourself. Share the duties of caring for your surviving parent if you can, and make time for yourself.
You might find that caring for your surviving parent lessens the pain of loss. You still have an important parent-child relationship. As you and your parent grieve together, each of you may find comfort in a deeper connection.

New discoveries

At the same time you are feeling the loss of your parent, you may gain a new perspective of him or her. As you hear stories from others, look at pictures and sort through their personal items, you may get to know your parent in a new way.

If your other parent is still living, they may give you another view of their lives together. These new stories can enrich your own memories.

You may also hear things that disturb or disappoint you. Memories can be both joyful and painful, but they can also be healing and bring understanding and growth.

A new future

Part of grief is losing what you thought the future would be like. But as you heal, you will begin to imagine a different future, one that is made up of memories. Those memories will be woven into the next chapter in your life.

“\textit{I’m convinced the reason we are here is to remember, if we understand memory to be that uniquely human ability to create from the past a sense of meaning in the present and a trembling sense of possibility for the future.}”

- Seven Choices

Tools for healing

**Find sources of support.** Think about who you can share your grief with. Friends? Family? Do you have a spiritual leader or a community of faith to support you? You could also join a grief support group or talk with a grief counselor.

**Keep up the daily habits** that help you feel stable and healthy. When you don’t know what to do, do what you know to do. This will help create a sense of order in the midst of what feels like chaos. Do your normal activities such as eating meals on time, exercising, caring for family members, working, keeping up your home, doing things with others, gardening, hobbies, or listening to music.

**Accept offers of help.** Let others listen to you, support you and take care of daily needs such as rides, meals, baby sitting and chores. Let them lighten your load for a while.

**Let yourself cry** and talk about your parent when you want to. Others who also loved your parent understand and share in your grief. You may find comfort in comforting each other.

**Continue to cherish good memories.** Look through photos and items that remember you of your parent’s life. Tell stories and urge others to tell stories about him or her.

**Give yourself time** to process memories. As you remember, it’s possible you will get more sad. But “leaning into” your grief and accepting your feelings will help you heal and move toward a new future.
If you had a difficult or abusive relationship, you may grieve the loss of any resolution.

One way to ease your grief is to express your feelings to your parent as if he or she were still with you. This might aid you as you work through your feelings of conflict.

You might also get some relief and perspective if you share your thoughts with a trusted friend or counselor.

**Expect to grow as you grieve.** This is a good time to think about how your parent helps you grow and change. Think about how you can pass on your gratitude or love.

**Stay away from negative people.** Spend time with those who support and renew you. Limit your time with those who do not.

**Adjust your expectations.** Some people don’t know what to say. There will be times when friends or family make awkward or insensitive comments. Some people may give advice or avoid you because they are uncomfortable. Remember that most folks are well-intentioned and are doing the best that they can.

**Spirituality and grief**

Spirituality encompasses the whole self – mind, body, and spirit. You may have a specific faith, or your spirituality may be based on your beliefs, values, and sense of purpose.

Losing a loved one often creates spiritual distress and pain. Some find stability and comfort in keeping up their spiritual practices. Others may feel cut off from or angry with God. During this time of distress, you can help meet your spiritual needs by sharing your feelings with your Higher Power or with people who are close to you.

You may also want to ask for support from a faith community, clergy person, support group, or counselor.

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_Grieving is not weakness
Nor absence of faith.
Grieving is as natural as
Crying when you are hurt,
Sleeping when you are tired or
Sneezing when your nose itches.
It is nature’s way
Of healing a broken heart._

- Doug Manning
Expressions of grief and love

- Write your memories and feelings in a journal.
- Meditate or pray.
- Read about grief and healing.
- Plant a tree or shrub in memory of your parent.
- Create a collage, scrapbook, quilt or photo album.
- Write down stories and share them.
- Take part in a grief support group.
- Celebrate special days with an event. Take a day off to remember and reflect.
- Look for and nurture the best aspects of your parent that you see in yourself and others.
- Laugh as you recall funny stories.
- Cry when you feel overwhelmed.
- Give and accept comfort with others.

Grief Support Services

Essentia Health Grief Support Services is located in St. Mary’s Medical Center. It offers a variety of support groups for adults, teens and children. The support groups are free.

Individual or family therapy can help those who have lost a loved one. It can also help if you have had more than one loss or your loss is complicated.

The Adult Grief Support Group meets every month on the 3rd Tuesday from 7:00 to 8:30 p.m. The Senior Grief Support Group meets on the 2nd and 4th Wednesdays from 10:00 to 11:30 a.m. Both meet in St. Mary’s Medical Center, 2nd floor, in the Grief Support Library (Room 2216).

The Person-to-Person program matches trained volunteers with people who have had a similar loss of a loved one.

The Grief Support Library has many materials for your use.

For more information call 218-786-4402 or email griefcenter@essentiahealth.org.
Resources

*Swallowed by a Snake: The Gift of the Masculine Side of Healing* by Thomas R. Golden

*Father Loss: How Sons of All Ages Come to Terms with the Deaths of Their Dads* by Neil Chethik

*Remembrance of Father: Words to Heal the Heart* by Jonathon Lazear

*Motherless Mothers* by Hope Edelman

*After Goodbye: A Daughter’s Story of Grief and Promise* by Lynette Friesen

*Grieving the Death of a Mother* by Harold Ivan Smith

*Motherless Daughters: The Legacy of Loss* by Hope Edelman

*Never the Same, Coming to Terms with the Death of a Parent* by Donna Schuurman

*Death of a Parent: Reflections of Adults Mourning the Loss of a Father or Mother* by Delle Chatman and William Kenneally

*Losing Your Parents, Finding Your Self: The Defining Turning Point of Adult Life* by Victoria Secunda

*Remembrance of Mother: Words to Heal the Heart* by Jonathon Lazear

*Grieving for Dummies* by Greg Harvey

*Knocking on Heaven’s Door: the Path to a Better Way of Death* by Katy Butler

A book about difficult grief

*Coping with Your Difficult Older Parent: a Guide for Stressed-Out Children* by Grace LeBow and Barbara Kane

Websites

[www.adec.org](http://www.adec.org)
[www.griefnet.org](http://www.griefnet.org)
[www.grieflossrecovery.com/grief](http://www.grieflossrecovery.com/grief)
[www.hopeedelman.com](http://www.hopeedelman.com)
[www.momshalo.org](http://www.momshalo.org)
[www.hospicefoundation.org](http://www.hospicefoundation.org)

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