



The Death of an Adult Child

The death of any child, regardless of cause or age, is overwhelming to parents, who can never be fully prepared for their child to die before them. Parental grief is intense, long-lasting, and complex.

The grief and the healing process contain similar elements for all bereaved parents, but for those whose adult child has died, there are additional factors that may affect their grief. Others often assume that when the child who died was an adult, the parents' pain is less than if the child was young. Parents whose adult child has died often find their grief discounted or disallowed.

Discounted Grief

If an adult child dies as a result of an accident or illness, parents are frequently told by friends or family that they should be grateful their child lived as long as he or she did. Of course, you are grateful to have had your child for 20 or 30 years, or sometimes much longer, but that does not mean your grief is lessened.

Many parents have observed that their relationship with their adult child had evolved into one of friendship. Not only do they feel they have lost their child—they have lost a friend, often their best friend, as well.

Over time it is normal for the relationship between parents and older children to develop from parent child to a more mature relationship. Parents who have loved, reared, and encouraged their child's development into maturity and a full life of their own, feel a sense of pride and accomplishment as the adult child completes his or her education, establishes a career and develops adult relationships. By the time a child has reached adulthood, parents have made an immense emotional and financial investment in this person. When that life has not run its anticipated span, there is often a sense of abandonment combined with total futility. Parents often question their own purpose in life, since everything they invested in their child now seems for naught.

Discounted grief also occurs when the adult child dies from a cause that makes others uncomfortable or judgmental.

Guilt

Most bereaved parents experience guilt for having outlived their child. When adult children die as the result of suicide, substance related causes, driving drunk, AIDS, or other reasons that carry a social stigma, many parents often experience an even more intense sense of guilt for not having realized that their child was having serious difficulties. Parents often wonder what they could have done differently to prevent the situations that may have caused their child's death.

Judgmental statements from others indicating that the child died as the result of his or her own actions only add to the intense pain and sense of isolation and defeat felt by the parents. When suicide is involved, others may ask why no one saw it coming, causing the parents to feel they should have been able to see something often hidden deep within their child that not even experts in the field can always foresee.

Many times adult children live in a different area from the parents, and will have become established with their own homes, families, and careers. Thus, the parents have already dealt with the separation and adjusted to the changed routine or the empty nest syndrome. However, those who have not fully accepted the child leaving home, or the circumstances of their leaving, may find their grief greatly intensified.

Some parents were supporting their adult child due to a physical or mental illness, or when suffering difficulties with drugs or alcohol. This son or daughter may have become the focus of their lives, and the death leaves a huge void in the daily routine, which adds to their grief and feeling of loss.

Other Issues Often Faced by Parents When an Adult Child Dies

- If the adult child was married or had a family, the focus will usually be on the grief of the child's immediate family and not the parents.
- If the child was unmarried, there will be property, finances, estate, wills, and other legal issues with which the parents must contend.
- If the adult child was married, decisions and choices made around a memorial/funeral service will most often be made by the spouse, and input or thoughts from the parents are not welcomed or taken into consideration.
- If the adult child had children, they may need comforting as the surviving spouse is usually exhausted physically and emotionally and may be unable to comfort the children, who are also grieving.
- The parents of an unmarried adult child may be the ones who have to notify the child's employer, pastor, and friends.
- Parents eventually may have to handle the emotions that will arise when the spouse dates or remarries.
- Parents, especially those who are elderly or whose only child has died, may experience fears and concerns regarding who will take care of them in later years or in the case of failing health.
- If the parent has been financially or emotionally dependent upon the adult child, decisions must be made regarding where to turn for support.

Facing the Future

Be assured that a sense of purpose and meaning does return and the pain does lessen. One of the most demanding challenges you will face is to refocus your life.

Reexamining priorities and even questioning belief structures is not abnormal. If you are working outside the home, concentrate on arranging additional time off from work and plan ahead how you will handle special days such as anniversary dates and holidays. Often the day is easier than the fear that may lead up to it.

With remaining family, talk about the death, the loss, and the pain. Revisit the good memories of your child, and not just the immediate memories of the death. Try to understand that every person within the family will be grieving in their own manner. It is better to express feelings than to internalize them; crying has been proven to be healthy and therapeutic.

Allow friends to help. When they ask what they can do for you, don't be afraid to tell them of your needs. This will also help them.

While professional help may be needed, many parents do turn to The Compassionate Friends for support, finding hope and comfort by sharing their story with others. In this way they may gain insights into their reactions and learn ways to cope. Sharing also eases loneliness and allows expression of grief in an atmosphere of acceptance and understanding.

Bereaved parents often want to do something constructive in memory of their sons or daughters.

Many have established memorial funds, created scholarships, made donations to special charities, given books to libraries, planted trees, and become involved in helping others. For many, such acts keep the memories of their children alive and vibrant, giving them and others opportunities to feel the beauty of the life and love of their child. Not only are these activities a wonderful tribute, but they can also be very healing while providing a sense of purpose to the parent.

*This brochure is sponsored by Joe and Janet Neal
in loving memory of their son, Josh*

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