

Family and Caregiver Education

BEREAVEMENT

Adult Child Loss

No parent ever expects to outlive their children. It seems to go against the natural order of things, and you may think that you cannot bear this overwhelming loss. Having a better understanding of the feelings and reactions to expect after losing an adult child can help you better cope, manage the grief and promote healing.

Grief is not an orderly process with an end point. It comes in waves and the losses are ongoing over the course of a lifetime. Fresh loss is felt as you experience milestones and all the “first instances” without them. This is a loss of the future, of unfulfilled hopes and plans. The grief for the death of an adult child continues as each of these milestones come to pass without them, even as our fierce love for them continues.

There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Each grief experience is unique and influenced by our personalities, life experiences, age, gender, culture, beliefs, support system and type of death. The parent’s relationship with the one who died also affects their experience of loss and grief. If the adult child was married and had kids, your grief as their parent may be less acknowledged and supported than the grief of their spouse and children.

Individual parents often respond differently to loss, as they grieve in their own way. This can leave each feeling alone and estranged, finding it difficult to comfort each other while preoccupied with their own grief. Grieving takes a lot of energy and often creates a need for the person to go inward while they grapple with their own feelings. It’s important to respect another’s responses even if you may not understand their grief or it does not reflect what you are experiencing.

Fathers often find mourning more challenging as societal expectations pressure them to be the “strong one.” Discouraged from being openly emotional, they may feel overwhelmed, ignored, abandoned and alone. It’s essential that a father’s pain be acknowledged and given importance in the family structure. Encouraging them to express their emotions and be with others who accept the range of emotions they experience allows them to openly mourn their child in whatever way they need to express it.

Parents who are single, divorced, stepparents or adoptive parents — as well as those in nontraditional families — may find less awareness or support of their grief than those in more traditional nuclear families. Nonetheless, these parents too have nurtured, cared for

Bereavement Services

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and loved that adult child. All parents can feel a sense of emptiness and a lack of wholeness, regardless of their marital status or social circumstances.

As grief affects us emotionally, physically, spiritually, socially and, at times, financially, it can be helpful to focus on each area individually.

It is vitally important to be able to talk about your loss, so find someone you can express your grief with, who can acknowledge what you are feeling. Seek support from family, friends, faith communities, grief groups and bereavement counselors. You can also express your feelings through journaling, writing poetry, prayer, art, music and other creative activities. Having a healthy diet, getting sufficient rest and physical activity also promote good self-care.

There is solace in creating rituals. Seek ways to continue to love, honor and value the life of your adult child by creating memorials and ways to commemorate them.

Although it may take a long time, and grief will still resurface, life can include happiness and meaning. It is part of the healing process to work toward having an adult child's significance eclipse the devastation of their death.

Life can become richer and more meaningful again over time. As parents who know grief, you also know joy as no one else can.

Visit hov.org/grief-support for more information.