

When The Aging Outlive Their Children

We are horrified when a young child or young adult dies, but we react with less concern when a middle aged "child" dies. We forget that for a parent the age of the child has no relevance.

We focus our attention on the spouse or the children of the one who has died and ignore, or at least not recognize, the pain of the surviving mother or father. However, the pain of their loss is as real and as intense as that of the parent who loses a very young child.

When aging people lose their children they face particular difficulties with their grief. Many have lost spouses, siblings, or even other children (the loss of an infant or a stillborn child many years in the past should not be discounted.) In addition to the losses by death, many have lost their youth, health and/or independence. Grief accompanies these losses. When an adult child dies, the aging parent may feel overwhelmed.

Often, the attitude of the aging parent is an impediment to active grieving. He is of a generation that generally discourages open expression of emotions. Therefore, he has difficulty letting himself grieve in a healthy manner.

An aging bereaved parent also faces a lack of support and encouragement to grieve. Family and friends mistakenly believe that it's not healthy for the older person to cry and talk about her lost child. The encourage the aging parent to suppress her grief.

If you are an aging parent who has lost your child, the following are some suggestions for helping yourself:

- Recognize that your physical and emotional reactions to your child's death are normal and that you are not losing your mind as you may fear. Reading books on grief will assure you that what you are thinking and feeling is to be expected.
- Forget everything you've learned about "being strong" and "keeping a stiff upper lip." Crying and expressing your pain will give you relief. Pushing your pain down won't.
- Ignore others when they tell you to concentrate ONLY on the good things in your life. This is impossible. Your loss is real and you do hurt. Face that reality.
- Don't let others keep you busy "so you won't think about it." This won't work and will only exhaust you.

- Allow yourself to cry and to talk about what you are thinking and feeling. Attend a support group if possible.

- Take especially good care of your health. The stress of your grief will make you more susceptible to illness and exacerbate any illness you may already have. Eat balanced meals. Get plenty of rest (even if you can't sleep.) Exercise daily, even if it is only walking short distances.

If you are a relative or friend of an aging bereaved parent, the following are some helpful things you can do:

- Read about the grieving process to learn that the bereaved parent is reacting in a normal way.

- Encourage the parent to talk about his child who has died. Listen nonjudgmentally. Help him sort through what is real and not real in his anger and guilt.

- Remember that birthdays, anniversaries and other special days will be difficult. Expect and permit the parent to talk and reminisce about his child, especially on these days.

- Know that his grief may last well over a year. A two-to three-year duration is not abnormal. Understand that for the aging parent, grief might never be completely resolved.

By Margaret Gerner, M.S.W.
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Let Us Be Part of Your Grief ...



Once, there was a little child who went on an errand for her mother. She was late coming back and her mother asked for an explanation. The child explained that a playmate of hers down the street had fallen and broken her doll and that she had stayed to help her. The mother wondered what the child could do to help mend the broken doll. The little girl made a marvelous reply, "I just sat down and helped her cry." There are times when with other people, we cannot solve their problems, we can only become part of their grief.

By Charles Allen
"Perfect Peace" Guidepost, 1979
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