



My mother died

a booklet for young people

My mother died: a booklet for young people
Written by Susan Wallbank

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About the author

Susan Wallbank was counselling co-ordinator at Cruse Bereavement Care for many years and has extensive experience of counselling bereaved young people. She has published and broadcast widely on many aspects of bereavement. Her publications include the companion Cruse booklet *My Father Died*, and the book *Facing Grief: Bereavement and the Young Adult*, published by Lutterworth Press.

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Sometimes people die suddenly; sometimes they die after a long illness. However it happens, it nearly always takes us by surprise.

The early days

In the early days there is so much to do: people to be told, decisions to be made, the funeral to arrange. In spite of all this, you may still find it hard to believe that your mother has really died and that she isn't coming back.

Different cultures and religions have different ways of acknowledging death. The funeral service is important because it publicly marks the ending of a person's life. It is

an occasion when all those who loved or knew your mother in one way or another can come together to show that they cared about her. Everyone may be a little anxious beforehand and it helps to know what the arrangements are. Where will the funeral be? Will there be a burial or a cremation? How long will it last? Who might be coming? Who will I sit next to? Will I get upset?

Some people cry at funerals; others don't. Funerals can be very sad but also full of warmth; a celebration of the life of the person who has died.

In the following weeks you may find that your feelings are very confused and change from moment to moment. It can take quite a long time for your mind to take in what has happened and for you to begin to work out how your mother's death will affect you and the rest of your family in the months to come.

All kinds of questions that are hard to ask may come into your head. How will we live? Who will do the things my mother used to do? How will we all cope now? How will her death affect our plans for the next few months and beyond? Everyone in your family will be asking themselves questions and wondering how they will manage. The worst period is usually this early one, when no one knows what is going to happen. Many problems that seem large now will sort themselves out later on, so try not to worry too much about the future and what it may hold.

How did she die?

You will probably have to face this question sooner or later, and it helps to have an answer prepared. What answer you give will depend on what you know and understand about how your mother died. Your father and other relatives may find it hard at first to talk about your mother's death, especially if it was sudden and unexpected. Sometimes even they may not have the answer because it can take quite a time to gather all the information together.

Talking about how someone has died can be painful, and you will want to give only a brief answer to some people. With others, though, you may find that it helps to talk a little more about her death.

How do I feel?

Numbness, pain, sadness, anger, fear, guilt and even relief are all perfectly natural feelings to have when one of the most important people in your life has died.

The sense of numbness, of not feeling anything at all, is part of the shock of the early days. It can be our mind's way of protecting us from too many painful feelings or disturbing thoughts all at once. It is natural that we should want to forget that the death has happened whenever we can. Like most things that we hide away, at some point they come to the surface and then it is better to admit your feelings and allow them to show.

What is grief?

Grief is a mixture of all the feelings we experience, all the thoughts that go through our mind and all the things we have to do after we have lost someone or something important to us.

There are patterns to grief but everyone will grieve differently for the special loss they have suffered. Grief comes in waves; there are times when you may feel overwhelmed by it and times when you almost forget you are grieving. Grief does not last for ever, although it can feel like that when you are grieving deeply.

If, before your mother died, you were asked to describe how someone would feel who had lost a parent, you probably would not have said that they would feel angry. Most people do not think about this side of grief and yet it is there, and quite naturally so. When you think of what you have lost and how this is affecting your life now (and will continue to do so, in one way or another, for as long as you live), it is understandable that you should feel angry – angry with life for letting this happen to you, even angry with your mother for leaving you and not being there any longer to look after you. These angry feelings can explode quite suddenly, at school or at home. You may also feel irritable and bad tempered at times.

Guilt is another emotion that other people may not understand. They may ask, what have you to feel guilty about? But nearly everyone who has lost someone very close feels this from time to time. You may feel guilty because you do not seem to care enough, or because you are not feeling what you think you should be. You may think you are letting someone down, or feel you did not care enough for your mother when she was alive, or show her how much you cared.

When someone dies it is hard to remember that, before it happened, you were just an ordinary teenager; at this time in your life it is normal to have quarrels in the family and differences of opinion with your parents. If your mother was very ill before she died, you may have felt relief when the end

finally came, then guilty for feeling relieved. After we lose someone very close, feelings can change rapidly and this can be very confusing.

And grief can feel like fear, making your stomach turn over. You may be frightened that other people close to you could die, or worry about your own death. This is natural and the fears usually pass in time.

Sometimes grief can be felt physically. Sadness can be like a pain inside you. It can actually hurt to think of all you have lost.

Grief can affect what you want to eat, your memory and how you concentrate. It can affect how you sleep at night and you may find you have dreams and nightmares. Grief can make you think very deeply about the past, the world you are living in, what happens after death and what lies ahead. Grief is intensely hard work and you may feel exhausted at times.

What helps?

It helps to be able to make some sense of what is happening to you. Reading about grief or talking to people who have also lost someone can be useful. It can help to talk with relatives, family friends and neighbours about your mother and discover new aspects of her life. Sometimes it helps to have a place to ask those large, unanswerable questions such as 'Why did this happen to me?' If you are connected with a church of some kind, talking with a minister might be helpful.

There may be occasions when everything seems just too much to take and sometimes it can help to have someone there when you need a hug and a good cry. Many people who have lost someone very close to them feel that life is unbearable and may think about ending it. This is not because they want to die, but because the strain and distress is so great and it feels as if it will never get any better. These periods of despair do pass.

Adolescence is a time when emotions change rapidly from day to day. Bereavement can have a similar effect, and the combination of these two forces can lead to quite rapid swings of mood. If you feel depressed and can't talk about it at home, do go and see your doctor or a school or college counsellor if you have one. There may be a young person's counselling service or a bereavement service for young people such as Cruse Bereavement Care in your area. Cruse has a

special young people's helpline and a website where you can exchange thoughts, feelings and experiences with other bereaved young people (*see the back page of this booklet for details*).

What is most important is to be able to say how you are feeling to someone who will understand a little of what you are going through and help or advise you if needed.

Families and where you fit in

Families come in different shapes and sizes. Your parents may have been married or they may have lived together a long time but never actually married. They may have separated or divorced, and perhaps have re-married. You may be the only child, or have brothers and sisters and/or half-brothers and half-sisters. Some families are split by distance, anger or illness. Some parents separate and form other families that blend together to form new, extended family groups.

If your parents lived together and you are the only child or the eldest child in your family, you may find that your father naturally turns to you for support at this sad time. Younger brothers and sisters may want to talk about what has happened. Sometimes people may say: 'Thank goodness your father has got you to help him.' It can be rather frightening suddenly to be seen as someone who looks after other people, instead of being the one looked after.

Just because your mother has died doesn't mean you no longer have the same needs as any other teenager. You will still need to find your own identity and work gradually towards leaving home and building a life for yourself. If people are depending on you for support, this can be a difficult period, when it can seem as if your needs and those of your family are very different.

If you have brothers and sisters, you may find that each of you is affected in very different ways by your mother's death. Very young children often show how hurt they are feeling by clinging to an adult and crying. Some children don't want to go to school; others wet their bed, or want to sleep with a light on or in their parent's bed at night. Many children find it hard to be in a home full of so much sadness and disappear off with their friends whenever they can. Grief is like a huge weight in a family and sometimes it can feel as if one or two members are carrying more than the others.

When an important member of the family dies there are always quite a few jobs and tasks to be shared out among the others. Some of these you may be able to take on, as well as your schoolwork. Even little children can help by making their beds and tidying their rooms. Some people still think that housework is women's work. Of course this isn't the case; housework should be shared as equally as possible between all of you. At times you will all feel tired out. Until a new pattern is built up, this is an exhausting period.

If your mother and father lived apart and you are living with your father, the routine of your daily life may not change much. However, you may miss your mother very much at the times when you would have been with her. Sometimes the death of a parent may mean that you have to change who you live with; you may have to move home and perhaps change school. This means there will be many other losses and changes in your life alongside the loss of your mother.

Some children hardly know their mother at all. This does not mean they will not be affected when they hear that she is dead. We can grieve deeply for things we have never had and people we have not had a chance to know.

Grandparents, older brothers and sisters, other relatives and close family friends can be a great help. Sometimes they can help by just talking with you, sometimes by helping out with practical tasks. In the early days, quite a lot of people will offer help of one kind or another. At this time it can be hard to know what you need, but don't be afraid to ask if you feel there is something they could do that you know would help you or your family.

Mothers have a unique place in the family. Your mother may have been the person to whom you most often talked, or who asked how things had gone for you that day. It is often the mother who talks about friendships and feelings, as well as providing the clothes and food and comfort; who tells her children about the changes that will happen to them

as they begin to develop and grow up physically. Fathers can find it difficult to talk about these things, especially with their daughters. Whatever kind of family you live in, your mother had, and still has, a unique place in your life. The relationship you and she shared was special to you and her.

Your mother will have been important in different ways to different members of your family. To her parents she was their daughter; if she had brothers or sisters, they have lost a sister. To your father, your mother was the person he chose to share a special part of his life. As well as his wife, she may have been his colleague and best friend. When such a close partnership is ended by death, the loss can seem overwhelming. Even if the relationship went through bad patches, as is likely to happen sometimes, or ended in separation or divorce, the loss can still seem devastating and cause many painful and confused feelings.

In the first months everyone who knew and loved your mother will be deeply affected by what has happened. Like you, they may feel sad, numb, angry, fearful or guilty. Men and boys, however distressed and unhappy they may be, often try to hide their feelings. Fathers may believe they have to be strong to help you and cope with all the difficulties to be faced. You may feel that you cannot share your grief with your father in case it makes him more upset. But pretending that everything is all right, when it isn't, is usually not a good idea.

Everyone grieves in their own way, and at their own pace. Sometimes people need to cry and to talk about the past, again and again. Sometimes people need space to think things through quietly. Knowing that people have different ways of showing how they are feeling, and that these ways will change as time passes, helps us to understand what is happening a little more.

School or college

School or college fills a large part of your day, outside holidays. You may find it a relief to be somewhere where everything is going on just as normal: lessons continue, homework is set, course work needs completing, exams have to be faced. Your father has probably told the head teacher about your mother's death but, if your school or college is a large one, it is possible that not all your teachers or tutors will know what has happened.

You may find it hard to cope with schoolwork when there is so much else on your mind and you are finding it hard to concentrate. Try not to worry if your subject grades get worse; in time, they should get back to your usual standards. Some people find it helps to throw themselves into their work, and their grades actually improve.

If you have problems at home or at your school or college, perhaps with how other students are behaving towards you, do tell someone. You could ask a friend to approach a

particular teacher for you, get your father to write to your class teacher or tutor, or speak directly to someone at your school or college. You will probably find that a few staff members will be very willing to talk if you would like to do so, or your school or college may have a counsellor.

How your friends can help

It can seem that friends quickly forget what has happened to you. In some ways this can be a help because when you are with them you can forget too. If they are close friends then they do not really forget, just as you cannot really forget either. They may be waiting for you to show them how they can help. Sometimes showing how sad you are feeling helps other people to show their sympathy for you. People can be worried about mentioning your mother's death in case they upset you or say the wrong thing. So, if you want to talk about her or how you are feeling, do tell them. Of course, the most important thing friends can do is just be there and continue to include you in their lives.

When they heard about your mother, they may have asked themselves, 'Suppose it was my mother, what would I have done?' It will have made them think very hard about you and what you are going through, and about themselves and their own parents. You may not want to raise the subject with them, but if you do they are likely to have a lot of things to say and questions to ask you.

Seeing them with their mothers and hearing them talk about them can be very painful for a while. At times you may feel different from them. In this way only, you are different. However hard they try, there is no way they can really understand what it is like to lose a parent unless they too have lost one. You are not really alone. In the UK, about one in 25 children and young people have lost a parent by death, so it is very likely that other people in your school or college have experienced what you are going through.

Life changes

The years between ages 11 and 18 are times of great change. During them we move from the relative security of the small primary school to the larger secondary school, and from there on into further education or a job.

During these years you will be asked to make decisions. What do you want to do when you leave school? Which subjects should be studied and which given up? There will be exams to be taken, each one seeming to carry with it more importance.

This is a time of physical change as you grow from childhood into being an adult. Again there are decisions to be faced. When should you start going out with a boyfriend or girlfriend? How late should you be allowed to stay out at night? How do you balance your time between friends, schoolwork and helping in the home? As you change, so will

the relationship between you and your father. You are both learning a new set of rules and trying to find solutions to these new situations as they arise.

All teenagers face these changes, but you may find others arise after the death of your mother. Your father may decide to move home to be nearer to relatives or a new job. There may be less money now to live on, and money may be needed to pay someone to look after younger siblings if your father goes out to work. As well as coping with his grief, your father may get very tired if he is doing a job as well as running the home and trying to do some of the things your mother did.

Your father may find that, like other widowed people, his friendships will change now that he is a 'single' person once more. As well as existing friends, he will begin to make new friendships with other single people. Some of these may be women. You and your brothers and sisters may have mixed feelings about these new relationships. Do try to discuss how you feel with your father.

The whole of the first year of bereavement is one of change as everybody tries to find a way of living in these very different circumstances. At times you may find that there is conflict between the changes you need to make in your life and the needs of your family. For example, you may wish to leave home, but are worried about the effect this would have on your family. This is where older friends and relatives may be able to help you reach a decision.

Memories

Make sure you have something special of your mother's to remember her by – perhaps her watch, or a special piece of jewellery; something that makes you think especially of her. Looking at photographs of her may make you feel sad now, but later on you will be glad that you have them. Some people get a box and fill it with letters, photos, small objects – anything that holds special memories for them of the person who has died.

In the first year that follows your mother's death, each birthday and anniversary may bring back many memories and everyone in your family will miss her so much. Later on it becomes easier to remember the happier times, the fun things you did together.

Often, when a family member dies, the others come together in a close and caring way. This is one good thing that can come from such a sad loss. You will grow up and leave home knowing so much more about your feelings and yourself.

Your mother will always be a very important part of your growing up and your past. No one can ever take that away from you.

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How Cruse helps bereaved people

Cruse Bereavement Care is the leading national charity providing bereavement support services in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. We provide advice, information and support to anyone who has been bereaved (children, young people and adults), whenever and however the death has occurred.

Cruse offers face-to-face, telephone, email and website support. We have a national helpline and local services throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland. We also have a website and freephone helpline specifically for children and young people. Our services are provided by trained volunteers and are confidential and free.

Cruse books and publications

Cruse Bereavement Care stocks a wide range of books, leaflets and resources on bereavement. Please visit our website at www.cruse.org.uk or telephone **0208 939 9530** email info@cruse.org.uk

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Working towards equality and diversity

You can find Cruse on the web at

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where you can also find details of your nearest local branch

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