

Loss of a parent

Large print version

Cruse
Bereavement
Support

When a parent dies

Although most of us expect our parents to die before us, many adults are surprised by the complexity and depth of our grief when our mother or father dies. It can be very painful when your parent dies after a long and happy life. If they died unexpectedly or while younger this can be very difficult to cope with.

What you might feel after losing a parent

A range of feelings is normal when your parent dies.

You may feel very differently from one moment to the next, and the feelings can often contradict each other. As well as shock, grief or numbness, you might feel regret, guilt or anger.

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Feeling lost

You can feel lost after the death of a mother or father. You may even find yourself feeling like a child again, even if you're an adult with your own life and responsibilities.

Loss of unconditional love

Losing a parent may mean losing someone who thought you were the most special, and who loved you unconditionally.

Regret

If you had a difficult or estranged relationship, you might regret what you didn't have. You may feel very sad for a relationship it's not now possible to heal.

Fear

The death of a parent can make your own death seem closer and this can feel frightening. Sometimes people fear that the way their parent died may be the way they themselves will die.

Changing identity

The balance of generations changes when a parent dies. Before, you were still someone's child. Now you are the older generation and that can be a shock.

Loss of connection to the past

Losing a parent, or both parents, means you've lost a connection to your own childhood. Parents can talk to us about our own early years, and share memories in a way no-one else can.

Relief

If you've been looking after a parent who was suffering from a life-changing illness, you might feel some relief after they die. This is very normal. Try not feel guilty about how you're feeling. It's difficult to watch your parent suffer and it's OK to want their pain to end.

Effect on other relationships

Tension

A death in the family can bring people together, but it can also create tension. It can wake up old arguments and rivalries between brothers and sisters. Some families are able to support one another, but there may also be individual members who don't want to (or can't) share their feelings, and prefer to be left alone.

Change in dynamic

If one parent has died, your relationship with a parent or step-parent who is still alive may change. You may have

always thought of your parents together, as a partnership, and now find yourself getting to know the remaining parent as a separate person. If your parents were separated you may still find you feel differently to a parent who is still alive. As time goes on, you may have to cope with a parent starting a new relationship.

Change in care duties

The way you see yourself or the way others see you may change. You may have looked after an ill parent for some time or had regular contact, and this role has now disappeared. This can come as a release and also a loss. It can lead to a sense of isolation.

When a step-parent dies

As well as the usual feelings that come with losing a parent, the death of a step-parent may come with a number of different emotions specific to the relationship you had with them.

Common experiences after the loss of a step-parent include:

Guilt – If you had a difficult relationship with your step-parent you may feel a sense of longing or regret for a connection that never was.

Exclusion – when someone dies, community support is often focused on the partner or biological children of the person who died. Step-children may therefore feel left out of the grieving process.

Worries about family ties – the loss of a step-parent may put a strain on relationships with step-siblings and other family members. You may be concerned about losing the relationships you've built with step-siblings and other extended family members.

How to support yourself after the death of a parent

Talk to someone

Talking about your feelings really helps. Try talking about your parent with people that knew them. Or contact our helpline (see below).

Find ways to remember them

It can help to think of ways you can remember your parent, and keep them as part of your life. This might mean creating a memory box, a special album of pictures, or organising a time for family and friends to come together and remember.

Plan ahead on anniversaries

Birthdays, anniversaries, holidays and special days can be difficult after a parent dies. It can help to think in advance about how you are going to manage.

For more support call our helpline

0808 808 1677