

Grieving the Loss 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 twenty or thirty 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.

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.

Facing the Future: Parents may feel they have nothing to live for and thus think about a release from the intense pain. Many parents do feel this way, but be assured that a sense of purpose and meaning does return. The pain does lessen. One of the most demanding challenges you will face is to refocus your life. The loss of purpose and the thought of living the rest of your life without your child can be frightening.

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 dread that usually leads 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 proved 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.

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The mission of The Compassionate Friends is to assist families toward the positive resolution of grief following the death of a child of any age and to provide information to help others be supportive.

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