

Coping with the Loss of a Parent: Celebrating Holidays and Your Life Afterwards

BY JILLIAN BLUME

You're at a friend's house and the phone rings. It's your mother calling from a hospital. The sound of her voice, thin and faraway, immediately chills you. It may be only two little words — "It's Daddy" — but they change your world forever.

You go to the hospital to say goodbye. But the body lying there looks like a mask of what used to be your father or your mother. It bears only a whisper of your memory.

I had just graduated from high school when my own father died. One minute, my life was filled with friends, dating, dreams, and plans. The next minute, I found myself suddenly alone, my world frozen in a silent, alien room.

How will you make it through the funeral? It may be like a walking dream. Or you might surrender to a blurry numbness, or a ceaseless streaming of tears. Follow your instincts — funerals are for the living.

Afterwards, when there is nothing more to do, you are left with the terrible absence. Your grief is so immense, you can't believe you will survive it. Knowing something about grieving may alleviate some of your fear.

Grief is an organic, non-linear process. It is experienced psychologically, socially, and physically. "The experience of grief is different for everyone," says Dr. Laura Whitman, a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who has worked with patients of all ages for over 10 years. "None of the ways you react is wrong." There is no map to follow because every individual's grief is unique.

Your grief may express itself in different ways, often with powerfully disturbed, confusing emotions such as shock and denial, anger and resentment, guilt and recrimination, or sadness and depression. It is common for these feelings to occur over an extended period.

"One of the differences between adolescents and adults losing a parent is that teenagers don't expect to lose their parents at that age," Dr. Whitman explains. "Deaths have a differ-

ent resonance with teenagers who are trying to separate from their parents and find their own identity. It's harder to do that and join a group of peers when your experience is different from everyone else's."

After my father died, I thought I would feel bad and then get steadily better. Instead, at first, my grief deepened. I was unprepared and frightened. "It's important to find other people with similar experiences because people who have had someone important to them die are different. It's a life-changing experience," Dr. Whitman explains.

I can only tell you what I learned: if you let yourself feel your grief, you will move on. In six months, perhaps you will suddenly hear yourself laugh. But if you bury your grief somewhere deep inside where it disappears, you may become stuck in time. It may seem as if you've overcome it, but in reality, it has claimed you.

How do you go through the grieving process and still function? "It's healthier to keep going with one's normal experience, but it's not wrong to withdraw for some period of time," Dr. Whitman counsels. "It would be helpful, whatever the reaction, for a person to see a mental health professional after the loss of someone. They could also seek guidance from a priest or a rabbi, from friends, or a

school counselor." This is especially important if you are experiencing the warning signs of depression, which include insomnia, frequent crying, an inability to stop thinking about the event, fatigue, and loss of interest in daily activities. "If these symptoms are evident continuously for more than two weeks," Dr. Whitman warns, "it indicates the onset of a serious depression."

Coping with grief during holidays or special days, such as birthdays and anniversaries, can be particularly painful. Try to be honest about your feelings, and don't expect things to be the same as before. Understand that there is no right or wrong way to handle these days. Realize that it isn't going to be easy, but if you can, do the things that are most significant to you. "It's important to create meaningful ways to remember the person you miss with other people who miss them also," Dr. Whitman suggests.

These occasions are emotionally and physically draining, so try to get enough rest. You will need every bit of strength you have. Share your feelings with a relative or friend, and accept their help and support.

Holidays often magnify feelings of grief. Blocking these feelings is unhealthy. It's important and natural to experience the sadness that arises. Strive to keep the positive memory of the loved one alive.

Often after the first year, the people in your life will expect you to get over it. Do not let someone else dictate how long it should take you to work through your grief and return to "normal." Your unique grief is affected by many factors. Generally, the more intense symptoms of acute grief will begin to subside within a year.

Eventually, you will arrive at a place where you feel connected and part of life again. You will be a different person than you were at the beginning of your journey — you have grown, perhaps with a special kind of wisdom. Some aspects of your loss may never be resolved. You must accept that parts of your grief will remain with you for life. However, you may find that you are stronger now than you could ever have imagined becoming. ▶▶



COPING WITH GRIEF DURING THE HOLIDAYS

- Plan ahead. Sit down with your family and decide what you want to do for the holiday season.
- Undertake only what each family member can handle comfortably.
- Be easy on yourself. You can't please everyone.
- Let yourself cry — worrying about crying is an additional burden.
- Enjoy what you can, when you can.
- What you choose to do the first year you don't have to do the next year.
- Have relatives or close friends help with gift shopping.
- Be prepared to create some new traditions.