

# Living Through Mourning

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VOLUME TWO

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## Grief and Mourning Through a Camera Lens



By Scott W. Bradley, MSW, CT, NCPsyA

**W**hen mourning a loss, you may be confused about how you feel or even think you are going crazy—unable to put a voice to your feelings and thoughts. Putting these feelings into words, though, may provide a sense of relief, simply by knowing there is a reason for what you are feeling and that it is common.

A lot has been written about the stages of grief, but I've found that people tend to relate better to metaphoric explanations like the those I review below. Throughout the next ten volumes, we'll elaborate further on this constellation of thoughts, feelings, and physiological changes.

### **The Camera Lens is Completely Out of Focus: Shock and Numbness**

You cannot think or concentrate on anything. There is a hope that your life will not change that much, but this ends when other people resume their lives. A crushing sense of loss and bewilderment may take hold.


### **Focused for an Extreme Close Up: Rage, Hopelessness, Despair, Depression**

You lose your perspective on life. You can only see yourself, and your surroundings are insignificant. There is a sense that

living is very unstable and meaningless. Previous losses and other people's problems seem trivial to you right now.

**A Wider View: Finding a More Life-Affirming Outlook** You can peer into the future without your loved one being there. Two important things must be in place before you can adjust further: 1) A support network, i.e., church, friends, family, or a structured support group, and 2) A positive self-image. You need to be willing to pull yourself up from the depths.

**The Complete Picture: It's Still You, But You're Different Now** There is a sense of renewed freedom. You have a better understanding of how your relationship with your loved one has changed, and you can now find meaning in your new pursuits.

There is no prescribed order or duration for each change, and the way in which each mourner experiences this constellation of thoughts, feelings, and physiological changes is as unique as the individual. It is my hope that our exploration of these changes will provide some comfort and understanding to you during this difficult journey. 

# Losing a Parent During Adulthood

By Paivi M. Outinen, RN, LCSW

No matter how old you are when you lose a parent, this experience can evoke complex feelings. It's important to give yourself an opportunity to grieve this loss. Unfortunately, you might not always feel like you are permitted to do this.

The societal expectation is that we should accept the death of a parent as part of life's evolutionary process. It is regarded by many as normal and expected. You may feel rushed to return to daily life. Others might think you are "dwelling" too much if you continue to grieve after the funeral services have ended. Even close friends and family members, who had initially been empathetic and supportive of you, may begin to express their expectation that you'll put your sadness behind you and begin to move on. Geared for instant fixes, our society often lacks the empathy, patience, and willingness to understand the journey of bereavement.

This societal attitude may cause you to feel ashamed of the grief that persists long after your parent has died. However, it's important to remember that your relationship with your parents is the most complex and long-lasting relationship that


you have. The parenting you received as a child has a profound and enduring influence on your life and contributed to the adult you are today. It would be impossible to separate yourself from the influences of your parents, and this unique bond is what makes your grief so personal and important.

Another important aspect of your grief is the experience of a role reversal. Whereas your mother or father had previously been your family's most senior generation, you may now find yourself as the new matriarch or patriarch. Your parents may have been actively involved in all aspects of family life and may have been consulted on a variety of matters. The realization that this source of parental support no longer exists and that you may now be asked to provide it to others can weigh heavily on your shoulders. It may seem impossible to reconcile this new role with the feelings of being an orphan as well. You may be overwhelmed with fear, worry, and a sense of powerlessness.

Adjusting to your new role may take more time than you think. Along with handling everyday tasks, you may also need to learn

new skills and take the time to re-evaluate your relationships with family members. Months or years may pass before you gain a better understanding of your grief and have become more comfortable in your new role. For this reason, it is important to have an environment in which all thoughts and feelings are accepted and the length of grief is measured in personally meaningful ways, rather than in days or months. Your relationships with your mother and father are unique, complex, and intimate; the same is true of your grief over this loss.

## Top points to keep in mind:

- Accept all of your feelings as a normal part of grieving the loss of your parent.
- Allow the different aspects of your relationship with your parent to be what they were without judgment.
- Observe the shifts in your family relationships after your parent's death and consider how you would like your new role to be.
- Give yourself plenty of time to grieve this loss and adjust to your new role. 

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# Learning to Advocate for Yourself and Your Children

By Scott W. Bradley, MSW, CT

As you may be able to tell by now, our society has little patience with the painful matters of loss, grief and mourning, leaving you to fend for yourself and for your children. It's hard to blame them; this is difficult stuff to manage! So you have the option to advocate on behalf of your family or "drop out" of the system, which has particularly awkward outcomes in the workplace and in school.

There is plenty of material out there for administrators on how to accommodate

grief in the workplace or school (not that it gets integrated into the system), but very little exists on how to advocate on your own behalf in those environments. How do you prepare your workplace and your children's school to be accepting of a mourner's symptoms of grief? At work and in school there is little understanding of the fact that, in light of your huge loss, day-to-day tasks and problems will become trivial. Your attention span will be affected, your emotional state will be heightened, your short-term memory

will be challenged, and you may become physically debilitated and exhausted. You may require more days out of work or school. If the loss was sudden and/or traumatic, everything mentioned above is intensified dramatically.


Others will have reactions to your loss as well. They may fear their own mortality and become agitated with your feelings of grief and loss as a result. They may try to defend themselves against these unpleasant feelings. People may become

## Advocate *continued...*

impatient with "noncompliant" behavior and try to reprimand you or your children for reasons such as being late to work, forgetting an assignment or appointment, spontaneous crying, or a drop in performance. Rarely do workplaces and schools view "non-compliant" behavior as an emotional communication of hurt and anger, but rather as antisocial and inappropriate. You may get the feeling that others want you to be the way you were before your loss, but you know this is impossible. You are confounded by the dilemma of wanting to be connected to your co-workers and classmates, while feeling disconnected from the people and spaces from which you once derived pleasure and safety. Remember that these are not your "issues" but the "issues" of other people. They need help understanding that you or your children are going through biological, psychological, and social adjustments. While very normal, it may be scary for you, too. The lesson to advocate is that patience and understanding will go a long way in making your adjustments easier. In return, you will do your best to be a good employee or student, but you are likely to have very bad days.

The company you work for and the schools your children attend require a sort of education in order to maintain a healthy environment for yourself and for your children. Here are some starting points:

- Acknowledge the loss, and give the organization the pertinent information you want known about the death. Assure the organization that all is OK but that productivity may be affected.
- Acknowledge your role changes, social changes, and personal changes that will affect work, especially in the short term (absenteeism, changed children's schedule, and legal and estate issues).
- Communicate that you and your children want to be included in social gatherings, but may frequently decline the offer. This may be especially true early on.
- Teach the organization about the experience of grief as you know it, especially its long term effects. Most organizations have tolerance for a month or two of disruption and distraction, but mourning may affect you for much longer.
- Initiate communication about what staff or teachers can and cannot talk to you and the children about.
- Until you are ready to handle a full load at work or school, be realistic about the tasks you can manage and the quality of the work you will produce. Delegate and get support where you can, and learn to accept help from those who offer it.
- For your children, maintain school as the nurturing and protective environment it was before the loss. Just because grades slip and the child acts out as never before, this should not be thought of as misbehavior, but rather as symptoms of mourning! Teach the school to help your child put his or her feelings into words rather than into actions, and do not punish him/her.

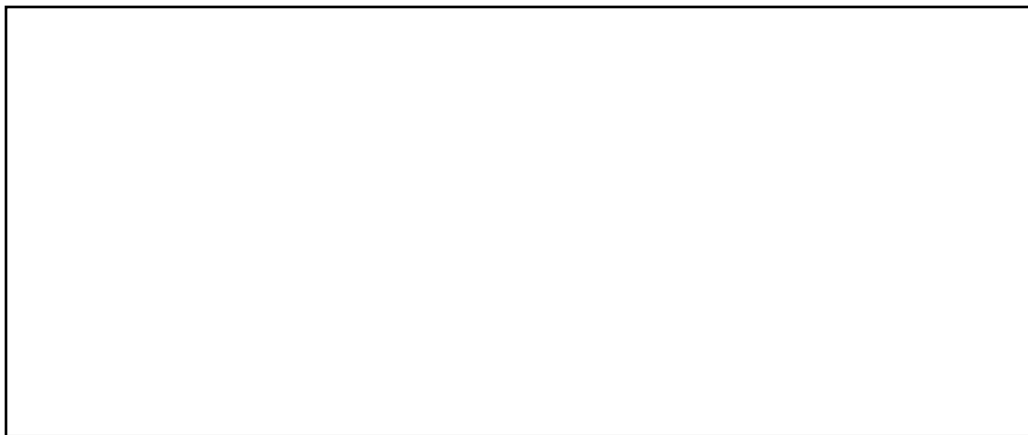
In conclusion, communicating your needs at work and school will help you feel less persecuted by your loss. By advocating for yourself and your family you will give others the feeling that they are in this with you, and that they can offer you the support you want—even if that means some time to yourself. Co-workers and classmates can be like an extended family. If given a chance, they may help you through this very difficult time. 

## Q&A

### Ask Our Bereavement Specialists

*My daughter thinks that it is inappropriate for me to be reading old letters that my husband wrote when we first dated. She thinks that I should deal with the present and not look back so fondly on the past. What do you think?*

It sounds like your daughter might be worried about your ability to carry on with your new life without your husband's physical presence. Reading old letters, looking at photographs, and remembering shared experiences with your husband are all a part of healthy grieving. It's also important to remember that your relationship with your husband was unique from the relationship he shared with your daughter. While your way of grieving is appropriate for you, your daughter may find it difficult to identify with it and this may contribute to her uneasiness. Your husband's death did not end these relationships but changed them. Your relationship is now based on the memories you have of him rather than having his physical presence with you. It takes time to fully accept this reality. Eventually you will be able to achieve a comfortable balance between remembering time with your husband and enjoying new activities and relationships.



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**Newsletter Feedback** "Just want to let you know how much the Living Through Mourning newsletter helped me cope at the most terrible and sad time of my life. Thank you." **EM, Summit NJ**

## Upcoming Issues

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| <b>VOL. 3</b> | The Camera Lens is Completely Out of Focus: Shock and Numbness           | <b>VOL. 7</b>  | A Wider View: Finding a More Life Affirming Outlook            |
| <b>VOL. 4</b> | His and Her Grief: What's Acceptable?                                    | <b>VOL. 8</b>  | Am I Mourning or Am I Depressed?                               |
| <b>VOL. 5</b> | Focused for an Extreme Close Up: Rage, Hopelessness, Despair, Depression | <b>VOL. 9</b>  | The Complete Picture: It's Still You, But You're Different Now |
| <b>VOL. 6</b> | How Can We Help Bereaved Children?                                       | <b>VOL. 10</b> | Bereavement and Your Physical Health                           |

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