

## Understanding Grief and Loss

*"As with the death of an infant, parental grief over the death of an adult child is often overlooked. Attention is focused on the child's spouse and family. People seem to forget that the adult, despite their age, was still a child to their parents."*

Therese Rando Ph.D.

The terms *grief*, *mourning*, and *bereavement* are often used interchangeably; however, they have slightly different meanings:

- **Grief** is a natural response to loss. It is a process that occurs over time and involves a range of feelings, thoughts, behaviours, and physical sensations.
- **Mourning** is the outward expression of that grief, which may include cultural and religious customs and rituals surrounding death. Mourning is also defined as the process of adapting to loss and adjusting to the death of a significant person.
- **Bereavement** refers to the state of having suffered a loss and the experiences that follow the death of a loved one.

*"Mourning is one of the most profound human experiences that it is possible to have...The deep capacity to weep for the loss of a loved one and to continue to treasure the memory of that loss is one of our noblest human traits."*

Sneidman (1980)



## Now I Know

*I never knew, when you lost your child,  
what you were going through.  
I wasn't there, I stayed away,  
I just deserted you.*

*I didn't know the words to say,  
I didn't know the things to do.  
I think your pain so frightened me,  
I didn't know how to comfort you.*

*And then one day MY child died.  
And you were the first one there.  
You quietly stayed by my side,  
Listened, and held me as I cried.*

*You didn't leave.  
You didn't go.  
The lesson learned is...  
Now I know.*

Alice Kerr, TCF Lower Bucks, PA

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For support in your area contact:

### THE COMPASSIONATE FRIENDS OF CANADA



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## Grieving the Death of an Adult Child



## THE COMPASSIONATE FRIENDS OF CANADA

An international peer support  
organization for bereaved parents and  
their surviving children

## The Death of an Adult Child

*"Age doesn't matter. Your child is your child no matter how old. But with an older child, the relationship you build over the years is different. My son was my best friend."*

To bury one of our children is a tragedy few of us can envision, no matter how well schooled in the grief process we may be. What happens to parents who have raised and "launched" their children, only to lose one in his or her adult life?

Many of the responses of such bereaved parents are sadly familiar to all grief:

- Debilitating fatigue
- Memory loss
- Changes in appetite and weight
- Insomnia, changes in sleep pattern
- Thoughts of suicide
- Guilt
- Denial

Parents have an inborn sense of responsibility for their children, which continues into the child's adult life, and often continues regardless of the cause of the child's death.

Parents may show resistance to the idea of going on with life without the child. Because the adult child may not have lived at home, parents can be tempted to "pretend" that the death never occurred. It is a fine line to assess when such denial is a necessary coping mechanism and when it is delaying the grief process.



## Effect on the Family

The death of an adult child can strain even long-term marriages.

Women, by nature, often consider themselves caretakers, and tend to blame themselves when a child dies.

Men often see themselves as protectors and problem solvers. A man might regard death as an indictment against his ability to protect his family.

Older couples typically get less sympathy than younger ones, and the lack of support is especially difficult for seniors facing uncertain futures, or health problems.

The nature of grief is to be an inner journey that forces a mental, spiritual and emotional re-evaluation of personal beliefs and attitudes. Even the most loving couples may pull away from each other to grieve in private and to search out new meaning in life.

Grief tends to exaggerate personality traits, and this can put an additional strain on the marriage.

The nature of the death can have a negative impact on a marriage. Violent deaths often require lengthy investigations or court trials; this can put a strain on a couple's emotional and physical resources. A death due to suicide often leaves parents searching for answers rather than dealing with grief.

Keeping a marriage intact when the world has seemingly come to an end is perhaps the hardest thing a couple will ever have to do.

*Grief tears us apart  
with the reckless abandon  
of a tornado.*

Haiku by Diantha Ain

## Other Issues

- If the adult child was unmarried, the parents will be the legal next of kin and will immediately have the responsibility for death notices, funeral arrangements and decisions about disposition of the body. The parents may not know the wishes of the deceased, and there may be input from siblings or a significant other to take into consideration. Even if the child had a will, the parents will be involved in taking care of personal effects and legal matters.
- Conversely, if the child was married, even if very recently, the spouse will have full legal rights and responsibilities for making all arrangements and decisions. The parents may feel that they are not being considered. They may actually be excluded, especially where there has been emotional or geographic distancing within the family, or if the surviving spouse is strongly bound to and reliant upon their family of origin.
- If there are grandchildren, the parents may find themselves emotionally supporting both of the following generations, younger individuals who might be grieving the loss of a loved one for the first time.
- If the child who died was a single parent, grandparents may find that they are suddenly parents again, this time to a traumatized child or children. One bereaved mother wrote: "When I lost my daughter, I also lost my grandson because we became his parents."
- If the surviving spouse moves on to a new relationship, parents may experience conflicting emotions as "life goes on". There can be challenges if a subsequent spouse brings another set of grandparents into the family, or if there is a baby born to the couple.
- As with the death of a child of any age, milestones can be painful. Family events, holidays, weddings...the absence of that special family member is felt.