

# After the Death of a Parent: From Shock to Self-Care

► Learn what to expect and common behaviors in grieving adolescents. Know when and where to seek support and how to take care of yourself.

Whether sudden or expected, the death of a parent is an emotional, painful, and traumatizing event for a family. You are not alone, even though you may feel like the only person who has experienced the death of a parent. Unfortunately, one in 20 children in the United States has experienced the death of a person they know before the age of 15.

This publication will give you an overview of the grieving process and common behaviors seen in grieving adolescents. A student has shared the story of their loss. Based on this story, we reflect on some coping strategies and outside resources that may benefit you during your family's time of grieving. As you read, keep in mind that every individual's grieving process is different and every child, parent, and family is unique. The goal is to become stronger by supporting one another—and yourself—through your loss.

## A Personal Story

In this publication, a student at Auburn University shares a personal story of the unexpected loss of their father. Their experience may not be the same as your loss, but it may help you gain some insights into how it feels for someone else.

## Finding Out

*Friday, October 12, 2012, is a day that I will never forget. It was my first day of fall break—I was a sophomore in high school at the time. My mother woke my younger brother and me up early. This seemed odd, as we were both planning on sleeping in. As she took us by the hand and walked us downstairs, she was pale, shaking, and trying to hold back tears. Once we sat down on the couch, all of my family members joined us in our living room. Once everyone was seated, my mother told us that our father had passed away during the night from a massive heart attack. I sat there rubbing my eyes, thinking that I was either dreaming or just hadn't heard her correctly. I was in complete shock: I couldn't cry; I*



*couldn't feel anything at all. I was numb. In the hours that followed, I received so many phone calls and texts from my friends, peers, and teachers, all expressing their sympathy for our loss. People began showing up at our home, bringing us meals and sympathy cards. I still had not processed what was happening. My father's funeral was the following Thursday, and I returned to school the following Monday. I just wanted my life to go back to "normal" as quickly as possible.*

## What to Expect: The Funeral and Formal Arrangements

You may not have experienced a death before and may not know what to expect. As a member of the grieving family, and as a youth who is old enough to understand what is going on, you and your family will be involved in the arrangements for a funeral or process that is appropriate to your culture and family.

You might be asked a lot of questions or asked to help with tasks or to help take care of younger people in the family. You might also be asked for your opinion about what you would like to have happen or you may have independent ideas about what could be helpful. If no one asks but you would like to be involved or you have an opinion, you can let someone know. They might not think to ask you.

If you feel confused or unsure about the process, find someone to talk with, such as a trusted family friend, older relative, religious leader, or school counselor. You can ask them what to expect. Your own parent might be too upset or busy to tell you everything you need or want to know.



## Understanding Your Reactions

No single young person will react to a loss in the same way. However, you might expect some changes in the short-term, medium-term, and long-term (including delayed effects).

### Reacting (My Way)

*Once I began to wrap my mind around the fact that my father had passed away, I immediately started acting out. While I have always been an individual who wasn't afraid to test the limits, I acted in ways that I did not realize I was even capable of after his death. I was very argumentative and defiant towards my mother, and my grades began to fall. Although my close friends and teachers noticed a difference in my personality, nobody ever offered to help me or even speak with me about how I was feeling or what my needs were—it seemed as if they simply didn't know what to do with me.*

Your emotions may be intense and they may change quickly. One moment you may feel calm, and the next, very angry or upset. You may feel numb at times and be unable to connect with feelings of grief. You may have a unique reaction, but you will likely experience some changes:

- A broad range of intense emotions including anger, fearfulness, sadness, and shock. You may feel other emotions too.
- Physical changes such as a loss in appetite or difficulty sleeping.

- Mental difficulties with concentrating or rapidly shifting attention.
- Emotional needs for closeness, but also restlessness and withdrawal.
- Sometimes you may feel sad, but sometimes you may lash out or be aggressive and angry. While it may not be acceptable to act on these emotions, the emotions themselves are part of the natural range of grief.

You may also have a feeling that what you do doesn't matter, and you don't care, even about yourself. If you feel like this, reach out. Find support immediately and develop a plan to check in with someone regularly.



## Being a Member of Your Family

As a young person, you are starting to be independent of your parents. As a result, you might not want to share all of your emotions with a parent or caregiver. You may also not want to show emotions with your friends; you might worry that they will see you differently. You might also withdraw because you don't want to be a burden or perhaps you want to blame someone for your parent's death. These feelings of guilt, anger, or shame are normal and need to be discussed with a trusted mentor so you can eventually find peace.

As you think about yourself and your family's needs, you might ask yourself:

- How is your family reacting?
- Have you grown distant from them? Has your surviving parent grown distant?
- Is it difficult for you or your family to talk?
- How are your relations with your parent or caregiver? Are they supportive? Frustrated? Difficult to reach?

The family members are all struggling like you are. Is there anything you need from them or that you can contribute? If your family members are not ready to discuss what you need or want, seek a trusted mentor to work through your feelings.

## Returning to School

Returning to school and resuming a typical schedule may be a challenge for you. School is a large part of your everyday life and you may need encouragement and support.

*I specifically remember that when I went back to school, I did not want to speak about my father's death, nor did I want to be asked about it; however, my avoidance of my emotions and needs had adverse effects on my academic success. While teachers and administrators noticed a change in my academic performance, they did not ask, How can I help? or What do you need?*

As time goes on, you may also find that your school performance is affected. You are the one who will know first; others may not know how to help. Talk about how you feel or your concerns with someone who is accepting. Your own parent might still be in shock or still overwhelmed with grief and may assume you are fine. Your parent or caregiver may also be worried about others, such as your siblings. Think of others who can help you find support. You may turn to an older relative, cousin, mentor at school, or a trusted teacher or coach who has experience and wisdom to share. Help may mean finding a study friend or tutor to help you stay on track. Keep seeking the help you need until you find someone who will be there for you.



## Health and Wellness: Self-Care

Throughout this process, it is important to support your physical, emotional, and mental health.

Here are some tips for self-care in this difficult time. Some of these might appeal to you, but there may also be other ways you can be gentle with yourself.

- Keep an emotion diary or a dream diary.
- Read a comforting book, watch a silly movie, or listen to a calming, or distracting, podcast. Sometimes you might want something that makes you laugh. That is okay.
- Try meditation or engage in a physical exercise, such as martial arts, sports, or other structured exercise, that helps you focus
- Find an online community of support. (See resources below.)
- Speak with a trusted older relative, friend, or community member not only about bereavement but also about your life.

Take care of your physical wellness too. You may have disrupted sleep or feel tired. Take naps, stay hydrated, eat good nutritious food, and exercise. These will help you stay balanced when your emotions are not. As time goes on, you will find yourself going short amounts of time without thinking of your loss. This is not a betrayal. It simply means that you are starting to leave the most intense stage of grief.

You also may find yourself taking risks. These might be out of character or put you in danger. Research has found that gender makes a difference in the types of risks people may take. Girls are more likely to seek comfort and reassurance from outside sources, which can lead to relationships that seem to offer a sense of reassurance or self-worth, and risky sexual behaviors. In contrast, boys may engage in behaviors such as fighting, substance abuse, or power struggles with authority figures. Of course, these gender trends are only averages. You will have your own unique reactions, but do pay attention to your own risky behavior and see it as a sign that you might need to check in with someone.

## Medium to Long-Term Effects

Your grief will continue to evolve. As time goes on, you will experience your bereavement differently. You will also face new challenges, and as these occur, you may need new support.



## Getting on with Life (Or Not)

*When I began the college application process, I remember being so excited. I thought that college would be the ticket to being happy again and an opportunity to get my life back together. NEWS FLASH—IT WASN'T. I didn't believe that my situation could be any worse until I started college. I had no guidance and no one telling me what I could and couldn't do. My freshman year of college was the first time that I was able to be away from my family and freely think about everything that I had gone through. It was not until my sophomore year (four years after my father's passing) that I realized just how tired I was of pushing my emotions about my father's death aside. I realized that I mentally and emotionally could not keep feeling guilty or reliving my last few days with my father. I needed to move on for my own well-being.*

Those who experience loss at an earlier age may be more at risk for immediate consequences and adverse effects later on. For example, those who have experienced the profound loss of a close loved one are more vulnerable to illness later in life. Children and adolescents who go through a tragedy such as the death of a parent may be more vulnerable to mental health challenges, such as anxiety, depression, and even thoughts of suicide. While this is not always the case, it is a possibility. Again, every youth is different and you will grieve *your way*. However, being *you* doesn't mean you are alone. As time goes on, resolving grief means finding a way to be you, a person who has experienced the loss of a parent.



## Finding a New Way

*Today, I am the happiest that I have been in a very long time. While I miss my father deeply every single day, and still have my share of "bad days," I am able to remind myself that he would not want me to miss out on all of life's experiences because I am too busy fixating on his passing. Although his death was sudden and tragic, I am much more compassionate, empathetic, and resilient. I did not have these qualities prior to this experience. I have taken my sad and traumatic situation and am now using it to help others who have gone through a tragedy similar to mine.*

## Summary

Recovering from the loss of a parent is not easy for any member of a family, and it will take time. You can help yourself and the family by recognizing that you will have short-term and long-term needs and by seeking appropriate and sustained support. Over time, look for opportunities to share your love for each family member, but also understand that everyone has their own journey. As a young person, this experience of early loss is a moment to understand how precious we are to one another, but also to discover the love and support that is there for you, too, on your journey.



## Helpful Supports

A whole community is waiting to comfort and empathize with you over the loss of a loved one, but be sure these are safe sources. No resource should attempt to solve your problem with a simple solution or ask you to turn over your trust. Many resources can be accessed from a phone or a computer.

## Websites

- Open to Hope
- GriefShare
- Grieving.com
- Hope Again
- Light a Candle

## Apps

- My Grief Angels support group
- Headspace meditation oriented toward wellness in grieving
- Apart of Me video game/virtual space, creating memories
- Smiles and Tears by Nelson's Journey, diary log and memories ceremonies

## More Resources

- Your family may have cultural or religious traditions with additional helpful resources

## More Alabama Extension Materials

- "After the Death of a Parent: Supporting Your Grieving Teenager," FCS-2626
- "Faith Communities Encourage Health Eating and Active Living"
- "Managing Stress Caused by Change"



**Silvia Vilches**, *Extension Specialist*, Assistant Professor, Family and Child Development, **Sophia Youmans**, Undergraduate Research Assistant, **Regan Moss**, Undergraduate Research Assistant, **Beth McDaniel**, Postdoctoral Project Manager, **Jenna Wettstein**, Undergraduate Research Assistant, Social Indicators Lab, and **Menglin Wei**, Graduate Student, Human Development and Family Science, all with Auburn University

For more information, contact your county Extension office. Visit [www.aces.edu/directory](http://www.aces.edu/directory).

Alabama Extension is an equal opportunity educator, employer, and provider. If you need a reasonable accommodation or language access services, contact ACES Human Resources at [aceshr@aces.edu](mailto:aceshr@aces.edu) or (334) 844-5531. © 2023 Alabama Cooperative Extension System. All rights reserved.

Revised January 2023, FCS-2627

[www.aces.edu](http://www.aces.edu)