



CANCERcare®

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# COPING WITH THE LOSS OF A PARENT WITH CANCER AS A YOUNG ADULT

As a young adult in your twenties or thirties, the death of a parent can be one of the most significant losses that you have encountered and can be accompanied by a longing for more time, shared experiences and connection. At a moment in life in which young adults are defining and refining their personal and professional selves, the death of a parent can unsettle the expectation and promise of the future. There are ways for you to commemorate the important role that a parent played in your life, maintain your connection to them and integrate their memory into your existence.

## HERE ARE SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR COPING WITH THE DEATH OF A PARENT FROM CANCER AS A YOUNG ADULT

**Acknowledge the reality and impact of the loss.** Allowing yourself to recognize the magnitude of the loss can be very difficult. Planning for remembrance ceremonies and communicating with those connected to your parent comes with its own burdens. Coping with the loss of a parent means learning to live without a person you have known for your whole life, and healing from such a loss takes a great deal of time and emotional energy.

**Allow yourself to grieve.** Give yourself permission to experience and express sadness. Crying can be helpful for some, but do not feel pressure to cry in order to exhibit your grief to others. The death of a parent brings about intense emotional responses that can feel uncomfortable. Grief is a uniquely individual journey and you need space to express emotion in ways that are reflective of your own strengths.



**Understand that grief manifests itself differently for each individual.** Everyone grieves differently and in their own time. Some individuals may express their grief outwardly while others may do so privately. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Knowing that everyone in your family has been affected by the death of your parent, work to be kind, compassionate and accepting of yourself and others.

**Talk about your grief.** Communicating about your grief and sharing your feelings with family members and friends can help you cope with the loss of a parent. Asking questions, sharing and acknowledging different grief narratives will honor the experience of the loss.

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**Find ways to exist in this new reality.** A parent passing away permanently and decisively changes your whole world and alters what was once familiar. Your parent was likely a major part of many important moments in your life, and this loss may also signal the loss of moments in your future that you imagined sharing with them. While reframing meanings and relationships in your life, you can establish new and creative ways of coping.

**Know that grief looks different over time.** After a parent passes away, you may feel angry, upset, numb, depressed and anxious. Although your grief experience belongs to you, also remember that you are not alone. As you navigate through the time after a loss, your grief can emerge differently, and you will experience good days and bad days, as the absence of a parent is a void that can never be filled. Understand that there are no fixed timelines for grief, and that patience is important.

**Plan for important dates and milestones.** Feelings may be magnified on birthdays, anniversaries, Mother's Day, Father's Day and other holidays. Weddings, the birth of a child, job changes and other new developments in your life can take on new and different meanings in the wake of the loss of a parent. Remembering anecdotes, listening to songs, looking at pictures and sharing with friends and family can help you better understand the immediate feelings surrounding milestones and events and connect you to the past.

**Find the right support network for you.** The death of a parent is isolating and you may not always feel supported by family and friends. Work to identify your needs and specify how those who care about you can be helpful. Engage loved ones, people in your community, people at your place of worship and co-workers. Understand the difference between those who are comfortable and open to conversations about your parent and those who may be able to offer to help with practical tasks. Consider professional support from an oncology social worker to help strengthen existing coping mechanisms and establish additional strategies for navigating your grief.

**Hold on to your memories and begin a new legacy.** Though death separates you from a parent physically, your emotional connection continues to exist and grow through memory. You may wish to honor your parent's memory by volunteering for cancer organizations or by involving yourself in a cause that your parent felt passionately about. Commemorating and honoring your parent—through activities or projects of any size—can help you cope with the grieving process and heal.

### **CancerCare® Can Help**

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