



CANCERcare®

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fact sheet

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

If you are a young adult in your twenties or thirties, the death of a parent can be one of life's most difficult and challenging experiences. No matter how much time you were able to spend with your parent, in the wake of a loss, it may never feel like it was enough. Although your parent has died, there are ways for you to commemorate the important role they played in your life.

HERE ARE SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR COPING WITH THE LOSS OF A PARENT

Acknowledge the loss. Allowing yourself to recognize this loss can be very difficult, especially if it is the first significant loss that you have experienced in your life or within your network of friends. You may discover yourself overwhelmed by preparing for your parent's funeral or memorial service. Remembrance ceremonies and even the support you may receive from family and friends immediately following your parent's death can be overwhelming at times. It is important to allow yourself time to process your feelings. Time will help you better understand what you have been through.

Allow yourself to grieve in the way that is right for you. Do not feel you have to prevent yourself from feeling sad and crying or, conversely, that you need to cry in order to show others that you are grieving. The feelings associated with the death of a parent may be intense and the grief can sometimes make us feel awkward. No-one though can tell you how to grieve. Grief is a difficult journey, especially if you are unsure with regard to how or what you should be feeling.

Understand that grief manifests itself differently for each individual. It is important to remember that

everyone grieves differently and in their own time. Some individuals may express their grief outwardly while others may internalize or repress their grief. For instance, you may notice that certain family members find comfort in being with others and feeling connected. Other family members may distance themselves from social interactions in order to grieve on their own. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. It can be helpful to keep in mind that everyone in your family has been affected by the death of your parent. Be kind to yourself and to others.

Talk about your grief. Talking about your grief and sharing your feelings with family members and friends can help you cope with the loss of a parent. Although you may all be members of the same family, no one may truly know or understand what everyone is thinking or how they are feeling. If family members and friends believe that you are isolating yourself, it can be helpful to explain your experience to them. Acknowledging everyone's grief will honor the experience of the loss.

Establish a "new normal". When you experience the death of a parent, your whole world irrevocably changes. Your world that was once so familiar may now appear strange to you. It is important to use this time to create new meanings in your life. This is a

(over)

process, and it can be helpful to establish new and creative ways of coping with these feelings. Although it may seem odd initially, over time this new normal will become an integral part of your life.

Grief looks different over time. Your grief may leave you feeling numb immediately following the death of a parent. As you return to your daily activities, you may find yourself feeling sad, overwhelmed and frightened. These emotions may be experienced individually or all at once. Some young adults report feeling extremely stressed and overwhelmed by an array of emotions immediately following the death of a parent, which is normal and to be expected. Although your grief experience belongs to you, you should also remember that you are not alone. Experiencing good days as well as bad days is common as you travel this path. You may have moments of highs and lows. The absence of your parent is a void that can never be filled. Your grief will look different each year whether it be one year or 10 years from when you experienced the loss. You never “get over” grief. Rather, you work through the experience and integrate the loss in your life.

Plan for important dates and milestones.

Holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, weddings, the birth of a child can sometimes take on a new and different meaning in the wake of a loss of a parent. Taking some time out to remember the important role your parent had in your life can help us cope with these events. Allow yourself time during these milestones to acknowledge your immediate feelings and to reflect on how you felt in the past. Remembering stories, songs and jokes that your

parent used to share with you can be comforting. If, for example, you are preparing for your wedding and finding it difficult to cope with your parent’s absence, going through old pictures can evoke pleasant memories of our parent. Reminiscing about your parent with family and friends can keep us connected. This is just one of many different ways in which you can remember your parent and keep their memory alive.

Find the right support network for you. You may discover yourself feeling alone at times following the death of your parent. Sometimes you may feel a lack of support from family and friends. The grief journey can be difficult and those around you may feel uncertain in terms of what to say or not to say to you. Family and friends, unsure of how to be supportive, may wait for you to initiate a conversation about your parent. Letting those around you know what they can do in order to be of support to you during this time can be helpful. You may even find that your support system changes and evolves as you grieve. Engaging in a support group with people who are experiencing similar feelings can normalize grief and foster camaraderie.

Begin a new legacy for your parent. Young adults often want to find ways in which to honor their parents’ memory. Some young adults volunteer for cancer organizations or involve themselves in a cause that their parent felt passionately about. Others create photo collages which tell the story of their parent’s life. Commemorating and honoring your parent—whether the activity or project is large, small, public or private—can help you cope with the grieving process and heal.

CancerCare® Can Help

Founded in 1944, CancerCare is the leading national organization providing free support services and information to help people manage the emotional, practical and financial challenges of cancer. Our comprehensive services include counseling and support groups over the phone, online and in-person, educational workshops, publications and financial and co-payment assistance. All CancerCare services are provided by professional oncology social workers and world-leading cancer experts.

To learn more, visit www.cancercares.org or call **800-813-HOPE (4673)**.

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