Here are some suggestions for coping with the death of a parent from cancer as a young adult:

**Acknowledge the loss.**
Allowing yourself to recognize this loss can be very difficult, especially if it is the first significant loss in your life or the first loss in your network of friends. You may find yourself overwhelmed with preparations for the funeral or ceremony, as well as support from family and friends immediately following your parent’s death. Give yourself time to process the death to better understand what you have been through.

**Allow yourself to grieve in the way that is right for you.** Do not feel that you have to abstain from crying or that you need to cry in order to show that you are grieving. No one is able to tell you how to grieve, which can be difficult for some people, especially if you are unsure of how or what to feel. Find something that makes you feel good. Don’t allow the “awkwardness” of death to take away from your grieving process.

**Understand that grief manifests itself differently for each individual.** Some individuals express grief outwardly while others internalize their grief. Even within a family unit, you may find that certain family members would like to feel connected by being around others, while other family members will remove themselves from a social situation in order to grieve on their own. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. It is important during this time to understand that the whole family has been affected by the death of your parent, so be kind to yourself and to others.

**Talk about your grief.** Since grief manifests differently in everyone, talk about your grief with family members and friends. Remember, they do not know what you are thinking, and you do not know what they are thinking. If you find that some family members or friends think that you are isolating yourself, explain to them your perspective. This will help family and friends acknowledge your grief more appropriately.
Establish a “new normal.” When you experience the death of a parent, your whole world might seem out of order. What you thought you knew and felt comfortable with will seem different and detached. Use this time to create new meanings in your life. Establish ways of coping with new feelings, situations, and your family members or friends. There are times when it will seem odd, but over time the new normal will become a regular part of you.

Grief looks different over time. Your grief may leave you feeling numb immediately following the death of your parent. As you return to your daily activities, you may find yourself feeling sad, overwhelmed, scared, etc. Some young adult express this time when they feel the most “crazy.” Do not feel alarmed, because you are not alone. As you continue to work through your grief, you will find that you will have good days, as well as bad days. Even throughout a single day, you will have moments of highs and lows. The death of your parent is a void that will never be filled, but your grief will look different, one year from now, as well as 10 or 15 years from now. You never “get over” grief. Rather, you are working through it.

Allow yourself to take care of your own needs. This is a delicate time for you. If you need to take some extra time off from work or your social life, make sure to plan for those needs. This might be a time to rebuild your daily activities if you were a full-time caregiver for your parent. Find something that allows you that “me-time.”

Plan for important dates and milestones. Whether it be a holiday, birthday, anniversary, wedding, birth of a child, etc., plan for how that day will be different now that your parent is no longer alive. Take some time during that day to remember the importance of your parent. Give yourself time during each milestone to address your current feelings, while reflecting on your past feelings. Remember stories, songs, jokes, etc. that your parent used to share with you. Look through old pictures to determine when and where it was taken. This can be a beautiful way of connecting old memories with new ones.

Find the right support network for you. Following the death of your parent, you may find that some of your supports will diminish. This may be because individuals are unsure of how to approach you regarding your parent’s death and are waiting for you to initiate a conversation about your parent. Your support system is continuously developing as your grieving process continues. During this time, you might find that some people in your support system want to help as much as they can. It is okay to say “there is nothing that you can do or say.”

Begin a new legacy for your parent. Many young adults want to find ways to keep their parent’s memory in their daily lives. Whether volunteering for an organization that your parent felt passionately about, or creating a photo collage of your parent, do something to commemorate the death of your parent.

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.cancercare.org or call 800-813-HOPE (4673). Facebook: facebook.com/cancercare | Twitter: @cancercare

This fact sheet was edited by Antoinette Nickelson, LMSW.