
Grief After the Loss of a Parent

When the person who has always been part of your story is no longer here

Losing a parent can change your sense of home, history and who you are

The death of a mother, father or parental figure can be profound at any age. Even when you are an adult with a family and life of your own, a parent may still represent history, belonging, familiarity, advice, conflict, protection, childhood memories and the person who remembers earlier versions of you.

Some relationships are warm and secure. Others are complicated, distant, painful or unfinished. Grief does not require an ideal relationship. You may mourn the parent you had, the parent you wished you had, or both at the same time.

When a parent has been ill for a long time, grief may have begun before the death. There can be exhaustion, anticipatory grief and a strange mixture of devastation and relief when suffering or intensive caring finally ends. Relief is not the opposite of love.

You can miss someone deeply and still have complicated feelings about who they were and what happened between you.

This stand-alone guide explores adult and younger-child parental bereavement, complicated relationships, unresolved conversations, caregiving and relief, family-role changes, siblings, belongings, anniversaries, continuing bonds, work and everyday life, reflection exercises, books, UK support, references and a message from Maggie.

The many versions of losing a parent

There is no single experience called 'losing a parent'. The relationship, timing and circumstances matter. A sudden death can bring shock and traumatic memories. A long illness can involve months or years of anticipatory grief. Dementia can create repeated losses before physical death. Estrangement may leave questions that can no longer be answered.

Losing a parent as an adult

Adults are sometimes expected to cope because parental death is considered a normal part of life. But something being expected eventually does not make it emotionally small. You may feel suddenly less anchored, particularly if that parent was the person you phoned first, relied upon practically, or associated with home.

Losing a parent when you are young

Children and teenagers may revisit parental loss repeatedly as they grow. Their understanding of death changes, and new milestones can create fresh questions: school events, leaving home, relationships, marriage, parenthood or achievements they wish the parent could see.

A parent who was also your carer or support

Where a parent provided practical, emotional, financial or disability-related support, bereavement can include immediate changes in daily functioning. Practical planning and grief support may both be needed.

Estrangement and difficult relationships

Death can close the possibility of apology, reconciliation, explanation or change. A person may grieve what happened and what never happened. They may also feel relief that a difficult relationship has ended. These feelings can coexist without cancelling one another.

There is no requirement to turn a complicated parent into a perfect one after they die.

The emotions that do not always fit together

Sadness and yearning	Missing their voice, routines, advice, humour, presence or simply knowing they were there.
Disorientation	Feeling as though part of your history or sense of home has disappeared.
Guilt	Replaying visits, arguments, caregiving decisions, things said or things left unsaid.
Relief	Common after prolonged illness, suffering, difficult caregiving or a harmful relationship.
Anger	At illness, healthcare, family, the parent, yourself, circumstances or the unfairness of the timing.
Regret	Grieving conversations, repair or experiences that can no longer happen.

Unresolved conversations

After death, the mind may keep creating conversations: what you wish you had asked, what you wanted them to understand, an apology you wanted to give or receive. Writing an unsent letter can help externalise these thoughts. It does not rewrite history; it gives the unfinished relationship somewhere to be expressed.

When grief becomes traumatic

If you witnessed a distressing death, medical emergency or prolonged suffering, memories of how the person died may temporarily dominate memories of how they lived. Trauma-informed therapy can help when intrusive images, nightmares, avoidance or intense physiological reactions remain persistent.

If you feel unable to keep yourself safe, seek urgent support. In the UK contact NHS 111, your GP or urgent mental-health services; call 999 or attend A&E; in an immediate emergency.

When the family changes shape

A parent's death can alter the structure of a family. Roles that seemed fixed may suddenly move. Someone becomes the oldest generation. One sibling takes on practical responsibilities. Family traditions need new hosts. Existing tensions can intensify under the pressure of grief.

Becoming the older generation

The realisation that there is no generation above you can feel unexpectedly exposing. Some people describe losing a psychological safety net even if they had been independent for decades. This can prompt thoughts about ageing, mortality and responsibility for younger family members.

Siblings can grieve the same parent differently

Each sibling had a different relationship with the parent. One may have been a carer, one geographically distant, one particularly close and another conflicted. Grief can reactivate childhood roles and rivalries. Try not to use visible emotion as a measure of love.

Practical decisions can become emotional decisions

Funerals, finances, probate, possessions and property can create conflict when people are exhausted and grieving. Where possible, separate urgent decisions from those that can wait. Written communication and neutral professional advice may reduce misunderstandings.

When you were the carer

After intensive caregiving, the loss may include routine, purpose and identity. You may suddenly have time you did not want and feel guilty for noticing the freedom. The end of caring can require its own adjustment alongside bereavement.

Relief after caring does not erase devotion. Exhaustion and love can occupy the same story.

Their belongings and the spaces they occupied

A coat on a hook, their shoes, handwriting, perfume, tools, chair, phone number or favourite mug can carry an extraordinary emotional charge. Ordinary objects can become evidence that someone really existed and that daily life once included them.

There is no deadline for sorting belongings

Some people need to begin quickly. Others cannot open a wardrobe for months. Families may also have practical deadlines that force decisions sooner than feels emotionally comfortable. If possible, create a small 'not now' category so meaningful objects do not have to be decided upon under pressure.

Choosing what to keep

You do not have to keep everything to prove love, and you do not have to clear everything to prove you are coping. Consider objects that carry a story, sensory memory or connection. Photographs of larger objects can preserve meaning when the object itself cannot be kept.

Digital belongings

Phones, voice notes, messages, social-media accounts and emails can become modern memory boxes. Back up anything important before devices or accounts are closed. Hearing a parent's recorded voice can be comforting for some and overwhelming for others.

Continuing bonds

You may cook their recipe, use a phrase they used, visit a place, tell grandchildren stories, wear something of theirs, support a cause or privately talk to them. Continuing bonds do not mean refusing reality; they can be part of integrating the relationship into life after death.

You are allowed to carry forward what was good and leave behind what hurt.

Anniversaries, milestones and everyday life

The first birthday, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Christmas and anniversary of the death are obvious markers, but unexpected triggers can be harder: reaching for the phone, seeing their favourite food, hearing a song, driving past their house or experiencing something you would normally tell them about.

Milestones they are missing

A wedding, new baby, graduation, promotion, house move or family celebration can hold happiness and grief together. You may feel the absence more strongly precisely because something good has happened.

Returning to work

Bereavement can affect concentration, memory, sleep and tolerance for ordinary workplace demands. A phased return, reduced workload, flexible hours or planned breaks may help. Colleagues may stop asking long before the grief has eased.

When people expect you to be 'back to normal'

There may not be a return to the exact person you were before. Adaptation can mean building a life that includes the fact of the loss. Grief often becomes less consuming over time, but this is not the same as forgetting.

Future decisions without them

It can feel strange making important decisions without a parent's advice or approval. Ask yourself what they taught you, what values you want to keep and where your own judgement now needs to take the lead.

A life continuing is not evidence that a relationship has ended inside you.

Reflection pages

What I miss most about my parent

Something I wish I could still tell them

An unfinished conversation

What I wish I had said: _____

What I wish I had heard: _____

What I need to say now, even if they cannot answer: _____

What I want to carry forward from them

What I am allowed to leave behind

A difficult date or milestone I want to prepare for

What might make it gentler? _____

Support, books and therapeutic resources

UK support

Cruse Bereavement Support provides bereavement information and support across the UK.

At a Loss helps people find bereavement services and information.

Child Bereavement UK supports children and young people who are bereaved, as well as families supporting them.

Winston's Wish provides specialist support for bereaved children, young people and their families.

Books

Julia Samuel - *Grief Works*. Explores bereavement through clinical experience and different kinds of loss.

Megan Devine - *It's OK That You're Not OK*. Particularly useful when grief feels misunderstood or pressured to resolve.

Hope Edelman - *Motherless Daughters*. Explores the long-term impact of mother loss across a woman's life.

Alexander Levy - *The Orphaned Adult*. Focuses on the often underestimated impact of parental death in adulthood.

Therapeutic approaches

Bereavement counselling can provide space for memories, guilt, anger and family complexity. Trauma-focused approaches may be useful where the circumstances of death remain intrusive. Family therapy can help when grief and practical decisions have intensified conflict. The aim is not to erase the relationship, but to help the bereaved person live with it in a changed form.

Useful frameworks include the Dual Process Model of bereavement, which recognises movement between confronting the loss and engaging with everyday restoration, and Continuing Bonds theory, which recognises that an ongoing inner relationship with the person who died can be healthy.

A message from me

Losing a parent can make you feel young and old at the same time. You may be managing a home, work, children and responsibilities, yet still find yourself wanting to pick up the phone and hear the person who knew you before all of those roles existed.

And if your relationship was difficult, grief may be even harder to explain. You are allowed to miss them and be angry. You are allowed to love parts of them and feel relief about other parts. You are allowed to grieve the relationship you never got to have.

There is no need to rush through their belongings, stop saying their name or pretend that important dates no longer matter. Equally, you are allowed to laugh, make new traditions, change things and live a life they are not physically here to see.

What they gave you, what you learned despite them, the stories you carry and the person you have become can all continue. Grief changes the relationship; it does not make the relationship meaningless.

Be gentle with the part of you that still reaches for them.

Maggie

Space to Breathe Therapy

This guide is for education and emotional support. It is not a substitute for individual medical or psychological assessment, treatment or emergency care.

References and further reading

Stroebe, M. & Schut, H. - Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement.

Klass, D., Silverman, P. R. & Nickman, S. L. (eds.) - *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*.

NHS bereavement and urgent mental-health information should be used for current individual healthcare and crisis guidance.