



## Can We Talk?

**By Sue Rowen, LMFT**

*“Anything that’s human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable. When we can talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming, less upsetting, and less scary. The people we trust with that important talk can help us know that we are not alone.”*

— Fred Rogers

Your parent has died. Have you stopped speaking about this huge loss and your pain to your remaining parent?

Your spouse has died. Have you stopped speaking about this huge loss and your pain to your adult children?

That’s often what happens. Everyone stops talking, not wanting to cause more pain and wanting to look “okay.” No one is okay... yet, everyone just stops talking about the heartache and the huge change.

There are lots of questions that come up in a family after a parent or spouse dies, but they often go unaddressed. Why do we stop talking? Well, there are lots of reasons.

**If you’re the parent:**

You don’t want to impose your pain and grief on your children.

Your kids are leading their own lives, and it’s often hard to find time to get together in a private setting.

**If you’re an adult child:**

You often start to worry about your surviving parent... their fragility and ability to get through this.

You just lost one parent. You sure don’t want to lose the other... or cause additional pain or heartache.

**For both surviving parent and adult children:**

It’s awkward and painful to talk about the “elephant in the room.”

No matter what you do, you can’t fix this. The loss is big and so painful.

So what happens? Usually, not much until some one opens a conversation.

There may be little or very superficial conversation because many surviving parents and their adult children have silent “rules” about sharing feelings and thoughts. These rules and old scripts are carried with them and handed down from one generation to another about not sharing “bad” things and feelings.

Only you know your personal concerns so first you need to decide the topic of conversation you’d like to broach. There are many concerns that both the surviving parent and adult children are thinking about. Some thoughts are shared concerns.

Others are very different.

**For the parent, these may be:**

How do I share my feelings with my adult children?

How do I let them know it is okay to talk about something no one seems to want to talk about?

Can I afford some in-home help? Will my kids approve if I hire some help?

**For the adult children, these may be:**

How do I ask about the financial picture for my mom/dad now?

Why does my parent seem different, more confused, distracted, depressed? I am so worried my parent is not “okay.”

Does my mom/dad need to downsize, be able to live alone, be in assisted living? Is it realistic to think he/she really can take care of himself?

Does my parent need or want some temporary help?

I want my parent to feel independent. Is that what my parent is thinking?

Often parent and child seem to be grieving two different people. In a sense that is true. While the adult child has suffered the loss of a parent, the surviving parent has suffered a loss that changes a major part of their everyday life. Everyone involved has had a unique relationship with a loved one. Yet, alternate reactions to the same death may not be comprehensible to anyone.

For example, there are widows who would not dare to tell their children they are relieved by their husband's death, especially when it follows a long drawn out debilitating illness or a difficult relationship. An adult child may find this thinking difficult to understand. It may even anger or alienate them.

Questions are the most important tool for gaining information about understanding your family.

#### **Questions For A Surviving Parent To Ask Adult Children:**

I have some thoughts I'd like to share with you.  
Can we talk? Can we make a lunch or dinner date?

You can share your feelings with me anytime, any place. Are you okay with that, even if I feel sad and cry?

Talking about my loss helps me heal — is that okay with you?

I have concerns about my future with you — may I share those with you?

Realize that your grief can be very different from your adult children's but there are so many common concerns like money, insurance, family trusts, moving, plans for the future.

Realize your adult children are often looking for an open discussion and are afraid to open such a conversation for fear of causing you more pain.

Model and share that crying isn't a sign of weakness but rather a sign of strength. Invite them to cry with you. A family that cries together heals together.

#### **Questions For Adult Children To Ask Their Surviving Parent:**

Mom/Dad, how are you doing today?

Do you have time to share a meal and talk?

Can you come to dinner at our house? We really want to spend some time with you and share some thoughts and stories.

Recognize that there will be a temptation to shift roles. You might feel the need to protect your surviving parent and want to make decisions that your surviving parent seems unable to make. Try to be aware that this is not a productive role to take. Consult with your surviving parent on decisions.

Recognize that your surviving parent is going through one of the most traumatic transitions that people ever experience. Your parent's grieving will probably take a long time.

Patience and a willingness to listen will allow your parent to express his/her feelings and thoughts in a safe zone without feeling judged.

Having any of these conversations may feel unnecessary and impossible; however, taking a small step with minimal risk has the potential to positively impact all of your family relationships.

Murray Bowen, a pioneer in family systems and author of "Living Beyond Loss," sums it up with these words: "All families have either an "open" or "closed" relationship system. In an open system, the family members are free to communicate their most important inner thoughts and feelings to others. In a "closed" system, there is an automatic reflex to protect oneself from anxiety by avoiding "taboo" subjects. These taboos can be anything — it depends on the individual family. Typically, death is a big taboo subject. Bowen notes that any change — and especially the death of a central family member, like a parent — is going to upset the emotional equilibrium of the family. But it will be much harder for everyone to adjust in a closed system.

So, consider taking a step, even a small step to open communication. Talk about your loss and about the love. Work together and heal together.