



# My Parent Died - What Do I Do Now?

## *A few questions and answers*

by Dr. Evelyn Pechter

*I didn't have a good relationship with my mother. Now that she's died, I'm confused — why do I feel the grief and guilt that I feel?*

Relationships are often complicated, especially when there has been conflict. When a relationship is complicated, volatile, even abusive, there is a grief process that needs attention. Your grief is a way of expressing feelings that perhaps did not get that attention while your parent was alive. Perhaps the guilt you feel is a way of acknowledging that you would have liked a different relationship. In difficult relationships with parents, there is often a lot that was unsaid. In a grief group, you have the opportunity to process those unsaid words in a safe environment. You may find that you are not alone and more importantly you and your feelings find support.

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*Now that both parents have died, my siblings and I are at a loss how to handle the holidays. We don't seem motivated about any of the traditions we used to have. What do we do with those traditions?*

Sometimes there are traditions that feel uncomfortable to continue without the parents that motivated them. Sometimes it just takes a while until they resume again. Meanwhile, it can be helpful to discuss with family having some new traditions that still can honor your parents. Or maybe finding that continuing the old traditions with a few changes to them to also honor your current feelings can be uplifting. More often than not, it is the anticipation of the holiday that is more difficult than the actual holiday. It is true, the table will look different, someone special is not there. Yet, in many ways your parent will be there in spirit and in your hearts.

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*My father died, I'm not sure a grief group for a parent is for me. How would I know?*

Good for you for wondering about a grief group. Wondering and grieving is part of what happens in a grief group. Wondering how to share — will others understand

me? Grief in community is the most important healing process we have as human beings. Grieving is painful enough, and alone is more painful. In a group, you realize that what you are feeling is not abnormal, quite the opposite. In a grief group you may be more understood and supported than you could have imagined. When grief is not processed, it sits inside and festers, causing more pain. Sharing your grief with others in a safe, non-judgmental group can be very healing and healthy.

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*My mother died last year. My father is dating and I'm not sure I want to have them come to my house together. It's too soon. How do I handle this?*

You are grieving your mother. Your father is too, and he is lonely missing his wife. You are both handling that loneliness and grief in different ways. Neither way is right or wrong, just different. You may be thinking about your connection to your father. You don't want to lose him. Part of having that continued connection is the communication you can have with him. Share your feelings about missing your mother and your concern about how your relationship with him will change. He might be thinking the same; that's why he wants to come to your home and bring someone new along. It's awkward in the beginning. Allow the awkward, allow the feelings and continue to support him and be honest with him.

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*I took care of my mother for 10 years, and now that she has died, I'm not sure how to re-enter social life? I think I'm without a purpose now. How do I find purpose again?*

This is such an important question, and is often a topic in the grief groups. Purpose holds the key to identity — who you were when you were caring for your mother — and now that she is no longer here, your identity is not the same. Purpose also has a certain motivation to it. You were motivated to care for your mother, perhaps driven to do all you could to keep

her comfortable, safe and living. Finding your motivation is a good road to many facets of purpose and identity. Maybe you find what you are looking for by processing your quest in the group, as others also process their quest for purpose.

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*My father died and I'm concerned about my mother. I'm finding myself taking on a lot of responsibility and worrying about her. It's causing some friction.*

That's a common occurrence. You are concerned and want your mother, the one parent you have now, to be safe. Most likely, your mother still wants to feel independent. Perhaps you can remember when you were young, starting to date or enjoying social activities with friends. Your mother probably worried about you then. In the grief groups, we talk about communicating your feelings in a way that allows both of you to consider each other. When you were younger you wanted to be trusted that you were an adult. Now your mother wants to be trusted that she is not a child. Both of you are so important to each other and need to be considerate of each other.

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*How long will I grieve my deceased parent? It's already been eight years!*

There is no timeline for grief. There will always be times when the grief is heightened, around certain significant dates including birthdays and holidays, and just remembering special times together. The intensity of the grief changes. Perhaps you are aware how that has changed, and yet when a grief wave comes, it seems as if it hasn't changed at all — you are in your grief, in that moment. That's when you want to take a breath and acknowledge how much you miss and love your parent. In the groups, we talk about not pushing away the grief, allowing it, honoring the love of your parent. It's the reason HOPE Connection facilitates Parent Loss groups for adult children. No matter the kind of relationship, no matter the timeline, the group makes a difference in the healing process.