



When your parent dies

insights for bereaved adults

When your parent dies: insights for bereaved adults
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Parents are special.

Although it is in the natural order of things to expect your parents to die before you, many people are surprised by the complexity and depth of their grief when it happens.

Introduction

Losing a husband, wife or partner is widely recognised as a major bereavement, but adults are often expected to take the death of a parent in their stride. However, the grief that you feel when your mother or father dies is very real; of the many people who contact Cruse Bereavement Care for help every year, nearly a quarter are adults whose parent has died.

It is hard for friends and family to know just what your mother or father meant to you. They were, perhaps, a dear companion, someone who would always listen and know what to do, or someone who would bale you out of trouble. Perhaps your father or mother was someone to rebel against or was difficult or cantankerous. Possibly they were simply the one person you cannot imagine not being there in your life any more.

We have no choice over who our parents are and, while some children may find it hard to imagine a better father or mother, other children may wish that they could have had a choice and look back with hurt or anger. For most people, however, their feelings are more mixed: parents cannot be perfect and cannot always get it right, just as children cannot be perfect either. You may deeply love your father or mother while being fully aware of faults and failings on both sides.

As well as being individuals in their own right, parents are your own personal link with your past and with your childhood and it is this, above all, that makes the grief we feel when a parent dies so special.

As adults, it may seem as though we have put the world of childhood behind us and become fully independent. But we still remain our parent's child, memories and feelings run deep and a mother or father's death can uncover a feeling of vulnerability, as though at some level we are still in need of the protection that children expect from their parents. You may be feeling lost or uncertain now you realise you can no longer rely in the same way on their wisdom or guidance.

Memories from long ago can be reawakened by your mother or father's death. They may be happy memories, or they may be painful, but they are likely to bring with them a sense of time passing and to raise questions, some of which may be disturbing, about where you are now in your own life.

The death of a parent can seem like a milestone. Like other key events in the life of a family, such as leaving home, marriage, the birth of a baby or retirement, the death of your mother or father brings fundamental change. With their death, the balance of the generations shifts and your personal landscape changes. In your grief, you may only be

able to see that the old landmarks have gone and it may only be gradually that you are able to see the opening up of new possibilities for the future.

The death of your mother or father is a special loss. The grief that you feel will depend on a number of things, including the closeness of your recent relationship with him or her, what happened in the past when you were a child and what else is going on in your life at the moment. Your grief may not be straightforward and may be deep and painful. This booklet is an attempt to help you make some sense of what you may be experiencing.

Your feelings about your parent's death

It may be that your mother or father died peacefully at the end of a long and happy life, in the way that most of us would like to die when the time comes. But unfortunately death is not always like this, and in the early weeks and months you may feel distressed about the way it happened, especially if your mother or father died suddenly, alone, in pain, in an undignified manner or without you at their side.

Sudden death

A sudden death can bring special pain to those left behind, no matter what age your parent may have been. It can leave you struggling with feelings of disbelief and unreality, unable to take in what has happened. Sudden death may also prevent you from saying a proper goodbye.

Not everyone is able to be with their parents shortly before they die. Where it is possible, there is often a feeling that something valuable and important has taken place, even if your mother or father was not able to speak to you or was unconscious. With a sudden death you may believe that you have been robbed of this chance to say goodbye. You may also be upset at the thought that you were not able to say

some of the things you wanted or to put right anything that might have gone wrong between you.

A death that comes too soon

Your mother or father may no longer have been young but may not have seemed particularly old, either. It is then very hard to accept the parting. Death can appear to have taken away your parent's life before either of you were ready.

A parent who has played a large part in your life, and on whom you relied, will have left an especially large gap. It may be hard to take in that someone who meant so much to you, or who you cannot imagine not being around any more, can just cease to exist, and the shock of the loss is great.

Death after an illness

Many people lose a parent as a result of illness or following a long, slow decline. There may have been great discomfort or suffering, or you may have had to watch while your mother or father became helpless, changed almost beyond belief from a healthy adult to a dependent one. Their appearance may have altered considerably, or their personality may have become distorted by pain or mental confusion. Your own life may also have been disrupted by your parent's needs.

Your anxieties and your hopes and fears during this period will affect how you react after the death. You may focus on the care that your mother or father received, worrying

perhaps that more could have been done or wishing that you had been able to do more yourself.

The care or treatment your parent received may sometimes have fallen short of what you would have liked. If you believe this, it is important to talk to someone you trust who can help you get the facts clear and decide whether any further action is needed.

However, remember that it is natural to feel angry and upset when someone dies. Feeling hurt and alone can make us angry, and sometimes these feelings can spill over into anger with the doctors, nurses or others involved. Part of this reaction may also arise from your own anger with yourself or with your parent for any shortcomings in your relationship.

Terminal illness

The experience of watching someone you love die of a terminal illness may be so overwhelming that for a long time it will be hard to shake free of the memory. Even though illness or old age may have brought loss of dignity and at the end you may have felt relief when death came, your grief and sadness may still be very great.

Normal life often seems to come to a standstill while you are caring for or visiting an ill parent. After the death it can be hard to pick up the threads of your life again. It is at this point, especially, that family, friends or others can help by listening to you as you struggle to come to terms with what

has happened and what it means to live in a world from which your mother or father is missing.

Preparing for the death

If the death is expected, you may be able to prepare yourself for the loss to come. As each change in your mother or father occurs, you can grieve a little for what is slipping away. This is sometimes easier if your parent seems to accept the approach of death.

In some families it is possible to talk about dying and this can bring you very close together at the end. In other families this is more difficult. It is probably not realistic to try to change the habits of a lifetime and talk to your mother or father in a way that you have never done before, even if both of you know that death is near. But whatever is said or unsaid, in all families much is understood without words.

Grieving

Feelings of numbness, shock and disbelief are common after a death. Most of us think of grief as sadness and crying, but you may be surprised by how physical the pain of grief can be and how drained and exhausted you are. Many people sleep badly after a major bereavement, and some find that their temper frays easily. It is normal to grieve for someone who has played as big a part in your life as a mother or father, but it is also important to consult your doctor about any symptoms that worry you and to ask for help if you feel overwhelmed. There is no need for you to suffer the full burden of grief on your own.

The husband, wife or partner is normally treated as the person in the family who is most deeply affected by someone's death. Outsiders may believe that the children, especially if they are now adult, are less in need of sympathy and should take care of their surviving, grieving parent. It is not uncommon for the grief of sons and daughters to be discounted and minimised, and this can leave you feeling angry and put down.

Looking back

Your relationship with your parent during their final weeks or months may at first seem to say most about what you meant to each other. You may be worried and upset about what you see as your failures or about changes in your relationship caused by illness or old age. You may be forgetting just how far back your relationship stretches.

Your father or mother knew you on and off for all your life, and the relationship between you was built over many years. You may need to stand back and regain a sense of proportion about all the ups and downs over that time. You may be finding it hard to forgive either yourself or your parent for any differences or hurts between you, and this may be an especially painful part of your grief.

You may also need to remind yourself that you may well not have known everything about your mother or father. After all, a large part of their life was lived before you came along. Few parents tell their children everything about themselves, and some are more reserved than others.

You are bound to feel that the mother or father you knew was the 'real' one. It can come as a surprise to learn that others have viewed them in another way. Brothers and sisters often see different sides of the same parent, and talking to other members of the family and people of your parent's

generation can help you to get a more rounded picture of your mother or father.

When a mother or father dies you lose a unique person, and it is the nature of the actual relationship that counts most strongly when you grieve. Childhood memories, the hopes, expectations, disappointments, disagreements, the everyday taking for granted, the laughter, love and trust – these are some of the feelings you experience when the relationship has been a good one. However, few families are without stresses and misunderstandings to set alongside the warmth and the love.

We grieve for our parents according to how we knew them. We mourn for who they were to us, and we also yearn for what they were not or what they failed to be. We may grieve not only for our actual mother or father but also for the ideal parent of our dreams. We may all carry in our hearts a picture of the perfect father or mother, although no real life parent can possibly live up to this ideal.

Hopes and expectations

Losing your father or mother may lead you to think about what they hoped for you. Did you follow in their footsteps? Have you turned out as they expected? Did they make impossible demands on you? Were they proud of you or disappointed? Did they accept you as you are, or were they always trying to make you different? Sometimes, of course, it

is your father or mother who has disappointed you by their behaviour, their failures or lack of understanding, or in some way that you find hard to put into words.

In many cultures, parents who know that death is approaching will give a blessing to their children. It is a sign of approval and trust that the children will continue the family traditions. A formal blessing is not part of most modern British family traditions, but the sense and meaning of it are still present in other ways. Feeling approved and loved by their parents is important to most children, while a sense of being the odd one out, or of not belonging, creates mixed emotions when a parent dies.

Thinking about what you have lost

We need our parents in different ways at different stages in our lives. They have a part to play in our adult lives as well as when we were children, and when they die we can find ourselves missing them in a variety of different ways.

Losing a parent in your teens or 20s

The death of a father or mother may mean that the normal pattern of growing up, becoming independent and leaving home is disrupted or goes into reverse for a while, as the impact of the death pulls you back to an earlier stage of development or into closer involvement with the family. Without the support and encouragement of the parent who has died, you may experience a crisis of confidence and uncertainty as to who you are and where you are going in the future. Younger siblings or your remaining parent may make demands on you. Friends of your own age may not understand how you are feeling because they may not yet have gone through the same experience.

If you yourself have just become a parent

New mothers are often deeply affected by the death of their own mother when they are coping with the immense adjustments that having a baby brings. We learn to be a mother or father mainly by example, and many new parents rely heavily on their own parents at such a time. You may not follow all their advice and may choose to do some things quite differently, but your parents have been through it all themselves and it is usually a great comfort to know that they are there in the background, maybe helping you out or giving you the benefit of their experience. Many new mothers rely on their own mothers to ‘mother’ them a little as they move into this new stage in their lives, and they can feel very lost if a parent dies at such a time.

Becoming a new father is also a big step, bringing important new responsibilities and changes. You are usually expected to put your own cares to one side and devote yourself to looking after your wife or partner, so a man who is coping with the pain of losing his own mother or father, and perhaps comforting the remaining parent as well, may be under a great deal of stress. If you are expected to be strong for others, who is around to be strong for you?

Men, as well as women, may also find it hard to enter fully into all the excitement and joy that a new baby brings if they are coping with the very opposite emotions of grief and sadness at the death of a parent. These conflicting reactions

may, for a while, make you feel confused and at a loss, as though you can neither be properly happy nor properly sad.

Loss of a grandparent

When you become a parent, you also become aware of your mother and father as grandparents. The death of one of them at this stage robs your children of someone who might have played an important part in their lives, from babysitting and remembering birthdays to sharing in their successes and disappointments and passing down all the family memories and stories.

Someone to support you

Adults, however old they are, can still feel very much in need of a special link with a parent at certain times in their lives. You may be getting married or have other good news to share. You may be going through the pain and disruption of a divorce or a relationship that has broken down. Things may be tense at work or you may have lost your job. Your own children may be causing problems. The death of a mother or father at such times may find you with little energy to spare. You can feel overwhelmed by the loss not only of your actual father or mother but also of all the security and support that a parent can give when you are in trouble.

Were you caring for your parent?

The death of a mother or father is especially hard for people who have looked after a parent or have been living under the same roof for a long time. You may have been best friends as well as mother or father and child, and the care you provided may have been gladly and willingly given. However, regrets and resentments, perhaps deeply buried, may surface when your parent dies and mingle with the straightforward feelings of grief and loss.

As your mother or father became more frail, you may have noticed your relationship gradually changing. It may have felt as though you had become the parent, and your mother or father your child. This can be an opportunity for closeness and tenderness, but it may also give rise to tensions, frustrations or anxiety.

Spending time with your mother or father may have meant that you had little opportunity to strike out on your own and develop other relationships. You may have become so involved with the life of your father or mother that, when they die, you feel as though half of you has also gone. It may be difficult to cope on your own for a while.

If you have been looking after an elderly parent you may feel resentful that other members of the family have given little help. The help you needed or asked for may have been of a kind that they found hard to give. They may have thought that you did not need or want help. They may have

been too busy, or they may have made excuses. Some of them may have secretly resented the closeness between you and your mother or father.

In these circumstances, when your father or mother dies, you may find that other family members have been able to build up their lives or careers, leaving you with a much more uncertain future. If you lived in your parent's home, you may be facing the prospect of enormous changes and adjustments, and your financial position may be unclear. If you have no children, you may also be very aware that there is not likely to be anyone to care for you in the same way.

Your grief, at this point, may be intense, and you may have a very real sense of isolation and loneliness. Understanding and help, however, can come from unexpected quarters as well as from family, neighbours or friends.

Coming to terms with difficult feelings

It is common to experience some feelings of guilt after a death. Some people can pinpoint these emotions by saying 'I wish I had done more' or 'If only I had been closer or had visited more often'. Sometimes we can be worried by a general sense of guilt. No one can be a perfect child; when we look back there are always some things of which we are ashamed or would like to have said or done differently. But, although part of our sorrow is knowing that it is now too late to say 'sorry', we may also need to learn how to forgive ourselves, or at least to be less hard on ourselves, as we would be on others.

Blaming yourself

Sometimes children, even when they are grown-up, find it easier to blame themselves than their parents for any shortcomings in the relationship. As small children, we are so dependent on our parents and they are so all-powerful that we may come to believe that the parent must always be right and that we are the ones in the wrong. Feelings such as these, which started way back, can still be very real to us when we are adults.

Taking the blame for disappointment or failure may be your way of coping with deep sadness or anger that your mother or father failed you in some way. If you are struggling with feelings of guilt, you may find it helpful to talk them through with someone you know and trust who will make time to listen to you properly.

Loving one parent more than the other

We do not always love our parents equally. One may have been closer and more special to us than the other, and it is natural that we should miss that parent more. You may resent your less favourite parent for still being alive when your favourite parent has died, or feel relieved that it is your less favourite parent who has died first. You may have good reason to love one parent more than the other, but you may nonetheless find these uncomfortable emotions and thoughts leave you feeling guilty or confused.

Drifting apart

Some families drift apart because they live away from each other, perhaps in different countries. For others, the distance between the generations may be caused by different attitudes or lifestyles or by misunderstandings. Where the gap is particularly wide, you may not have communicated much with your parents. When you did meet, you may have found you had little in common.

Some separation is inevitable as families grow up and each member makes their own way in the world. But, looking back, such drifting apart can feel like a missed opportunity.

In such circumstances, when a parent dies, your grieving may be tinged with regret for the closeness that never was or that you once treasured and is now lost. You may blame your father or mother for not bridging that gap better, or you may be aware that you have become so absorbed in your own life that you have failed to keep in touch. You may have imagined that they would always be there for you. It comes as a shock to realise how the years have passed.

Difficult relationships

Not everyone has a happy childhood to look back on. There may have been frequent rows or emotional coldness, or the pain of divorce or death. There may have been violence or neglect. These may have been associated with mental or physical illness, addiction to drink or drugs, or they may have arisen from other misfortunes. The death of a parent may come as a relief. Children whose mother or father has made unreasonable or unpredictable demands on them may be glad that these have now come to an end.

Yet, at the same time, you may experience intense regret, bitterness or anger about the 'good' relationship that you were not able to enjoy with that parent, and that whatever happened in the past cannot now be altered or put right.

Difficult or explosive feelings may take you by surprise as old memories of hurts come rushing back. This opening up of old wounds, which you may have hoped were buried or healed, is deeply painful. Working through these conflicting emotions is part of your grieving, and it can be very helpful to talk about them to someone who can listen and accept them.

Split families

If you grew up in a family that was affected by separation or divorce, you may look back with mixed feelings. Although this may be in the past, and you and your parents have since established separate lives – perhaps with new partners and children – the anger and sadness may still be very real.

Whatever your present circumstances, the death of your mother or father is likely to reawaken memories of the turmoil surrounding your parents' separation, and these may become entangled with the sadness of your grieving. Even though you may be on good terms with them, the presence of step or half brothers or sisters may be a painful reminder of having to share your parent's love and attention.

Funeral arrangements in split families may also prove awkward. Who should be invited? Who might you prefer not to invite? Will the whole occasion be difficult and embarrassing? Even though the split between your mother and father may have taken place years ago, it can still bring back very powerful feelings of bitterness, anger or pain, and

these may flow over into relationships with other family members. In such a situation, mourning for your mother or father is far from straightforward.

Family relationships

The death of a parent is a time of great change and readjustment in a family. Many of the old ways and certainties are swept away. The remaining family members have to work out a way of behaving with each other that makes sense in the new circumstances and that contains enough of the past to give reassurance for the future.

Brothers and sisters

Brothers and sisters can react very differently to the death of the same parent. Losing a mother or father can stir up and bring to the surface feelings that may be long buried or that you thought you had outgrown.

Parents may try to treat their children equally, but each child is special in a different way. There are almost always some feelings of rivalry or jealousy among the children – a sense of being left out or of a particular closeness with one parent or the other. Feelings like these can still be very much alive and can be at the root of family misunderstandings when parents die.

The death sometimes leads to resentment or arguments about who inherits what. When a parent dies, the things that belonged to them suddenly take on special meaning and the smallest objects can gain sentimental value. We do not

always realise that arguments over possessions may be less about the actual value of the articles themselves than about the longing we had in childhood to have our full share of our parents' love.

Sharing things out among the family can be painful, even when there is a will. Nearly all of us feel the need to have some object that belonged to our parents, preferably one that meant something to us. When you hold in your hand something that your parents left to you or which you know they would have wanted you to have, it can feel like their last gift to you, almost like a blessing to send you on your way.

It is easy for old hurts to be reopened or for new hurts to arise. Brothers and sisters may grieve in different ways and it may be hard for you to understand that each of you is coping in your own way with perhaps very different memories of the childhood you shared. Where there have been strong rivalries or jealousies between you, it is not realistic to expect that differences will be healed just because a parent has died. However, in some families death does provide the opportunity for coming together again, for reconciliation and forgiveness of old resentments and hurts.

Only children

For only children, or children in small or scattered families, the death of a parent can create a very real sense of isolation and loneliness. It may mean that you have lost your last living

relative as well as the last person who was really close to you – perhaps the last person who remembers you as a child or the only person who knew for certain when your birthday is.

Only children are also likely to find themselves with the sole responsibility of seeing to the many practicalities that have to be faced when someone dies. Funeral directors are generally very helpful with the immediate arrangements, but dealing with the home and deciding what to do with the possessions can be a particularly difficult and daunting task if you are an only child.

Stresses in other relationships

Many people expect grown-up children to take the death of a parent in their stride, and sympathy and understanding are usually concentrated on the surviving parent. You may find, therefore, that your husband, wife or partner is bewildered by the way in which you react to losing your father or mother. Partnerships can come under great strain at this time. You may be grieving in such a way that you have little energy for your other important relationships, and partners can feel left out and resentful. Partners may also find it hard to be sympathetic to your grief if they did not get on well with the parent who has died, and you may find this hurtful and a source of friction.

It is hard for someone who has not experienced a major bereavement to understand what their partner is going

through and how long the process of grieving can take. With the best will in the world, partners sometimes offer what seem to you to be the wrong words or the wrong kind of help, and they will certainly long for you to become your normal self again.

If you have children, you may be hurt if they find it hard to understand and share your feelings. The grandparent who has died may not have meant as much to them as your parent did to you, and they may find your grief confusing and upsetting. People around you may criticise you for grieving, believing that your children are losing out through your mourning.

Because grief affects people differently, there is no blueprint of how to behave. You need to work through your grief in your own time and in your own way, but you have to take your family's needs into account too. Each couple has to work out the best way for them to cope with the bereavement, and this process can sometimes lead to greater understanding that, in turn, will help the children to cope with the situation.

Your remaining parent

Some couples appear to their children almost as one person: 'Mum and Dad.' They may do everything together and appear to think the same thoughts at the same time, or their double-act may include bickering and argument. When one dies, it can be very hard on the other. It may also be difficult for you, as their child, to get used to the idea that, where once there were two, there is now only one. You may even need to get to know the remaining parent as a separate individual, rather than as half of a couple. This can sometimes hold some surprises and require some readjustment on your part.

If your parents have lived together for a long time, the death of one of them can leave the remaining one feeling very lost. You may be afraid that your mother or father will simply fall apart and be unable to cope. You may be shocked by the change that the loss has brought about in them. You may be unsure about how much help they need and be worried about the demands that could be made on you.

The death of one parent can mean that the responsibility of caring for the other one may now fall on you. They may be very frail and elderly. You may be faced with difficult choices and the possibility of enormous changes in your own life in order to look after your surviving parent. Balancing your own needs with those of your parent and the rest of

your family can be a source of conflict to which there are no easy answers.

Whatever happens, nothing can take away the pain of the loss, either for them or for you. You have to allow the grief to take its course. If possible, you should discourage the parent from making major decisions, such as whether to move house, in the months following the bereavement.

It can be very tempting to rush in and organise a grieving parent, especially if they seem to be adrift and not looking after themselves properly. Of course people who have suffered a major bereavement do need support, both in terms of someone to listen and someone to provide practical help, but your parent may not yet know what his or her needs are likely to be in the future, and it can sometimes be hard to know just what will or will not be helpful. Some parents feel resentful because they think their children are not doing enough; others feel their children are pressurising them to take decisions for the future at a time when they simply want to be allowed to grieve.

You may be so upset by seeing your parent's grief that you feel you want to do something active to make things better. You may not always realise that this could stem from your own need to feel less uncomfortable and to tidy away the pain of your own grief. You may also be feeling that you want to make it up to your parents for things that have not gone right between you in the past.

A parent who recovers 'too soon'

People can have very fixed ideas about how long one 'ought' to grieve. You may feel that it is disrespectful if your parent stops grieving sooner than you think is right. While some children are glad that their widowed parent is beginning to enjoy life again, to others it can feel disloyal and wrong.

You may feel shocked if your father or mother shows signs of wanting to start a new relationship soon after the bereavement. The idea of your parent starting a new family is also likely to be painful and perhaps threatening. Your stake in any family property may be affected, as well as your sense of where you belong in your parent's affections. Some of these reactions may stem from anxieties and rivalries from your childhood days.

Although views about when it is right to start a new life and new relationships may cause friction in a family, every bereaved person is an individual with their own temperament and needs. Children cannot replace the partner who has died, or meet all their surviving parent's needs for love or companionship. It takes good will and understanding on both sides to accept that your parent has the right to run his or her own life, but that you too have feelings that need to be respected.

Where does this leave you?

Many people feel lost after the death of their mother or father. It is not only those whose parent dies young who may react in this way, but also those who are middle aged or even elderly. To suddenly find yourself feeling like an abandoned child – even though to the outside world you may appear fully grown up, with a job, a family, a life of your own – can be one of the more surprising features of your grief.

The death of a parent brings home to you the inevitability of your own death and perhaps makes it seem nearer than it was before. The balance of the generations changes. Before, you were still someone's child; now, you may find that you are the 'older generation', and that can be quite a shock. While your parents were still alive, you could shelter behind the knowledge that they were likely to die first. It may be uncomfortable to find yourself facing thoughts of your own death, which you may normally bury under the day-to-day business of living.

Re-thinking your views on death

Whatever your views on the meaning of life and death, the death of your mother or father may make you think again about your beliefs. Many people draw comfort and strength at this time from their religious faith; others go through a period of spiritual searching and questioning. You may not come up with any clear answers but, if you do, they will no longer be the ones you have simply learnt from someone else; they will be ones that spring from your own experience.

Inheritance

You will probably inherit some possessions from your parents and will have the responsibility of deciding what to keep and what to dispose of. Some things you will treasure because they remind you of your parents and of your childhood, but deciding about the rest may be more difficult.

Sometimes the presence of the parent who has died is still so powerful that you do not think you have the right to get rid of any of their possessions. You half expect them to come back at any moment and claim their property. You also may feel so confused and drained by your own emotions that you are not ready to take any decisions just yet.

For some people, a parent's possessions can seem like a sacred trust that they cannot get rid of, even though part of them would like to. Others may want to make a clean sweep and get rid of most objects.

Very often your attitude to the possessions reveals something of what you felt towards your parents: how much of your own person you feel, how much you have shared your father's or mother's beliefs and attitudes, and how much you have felt the need to follow your own path in life. You may have been in the habit of talking things over with your parents before making important decisions. Learning to do this on your own can be hard. You need to give yourself time.

But you also carry other legacies from your parents – your genes, attitudes, beliefs, culture and memories. These make up the unseen 'account' that you have built up together and on which you draw throughout your life.

Your parents have played a major part in shaping your sense of who you are. If you have felt loved and approved by your parent, you will feel emotionally rich. If the parenting you received has not been so good, you will feel rather poorer – the legacy from your parents will be mixed.

Where is 'home' now?

Many of us continue to think of the place in which our mother or father lives as 'home', even though we may long since have moved away. It may continue to be the centre of the wider family, the place where brothers and sisters can meet on an equal basis. Often the death of a parent means that their house has to be given up or sold. If you have lived with your mother or father, then their death may mean that you

do literally lose your home. Even if your 'homelessness' is not literal, you may experience feelings of insecurity now that the reassuring or powerful presence of your mother or father is no longer there.

Most people would hope to have a sense of inner well-being, of feeling comfortable with themselves, for most of the time. This may be undermined or swept away when you lose a parent. Yet, as time passes, you may come to realise that, although your father or mother has died, an enormous amount of what they were lives on in you. You know just what your mother or father would say in a particular situation. Often you can even hear the exact tone of voice. The experience of your mother or father has become part of you and, although they are no longer there in the flesh, they are far from lost to your inner world.

Where the relationship has been difficult, you may wish that you could be more free of your parent. Part of the work of grief may be to learn to tune in less to that remembered voice and strike out more on your own path.

Sometimes a parent's death can seem to set you free to be fully yourself at last. You can feel this even about a parent whom you love and respect. Parents with strong personalities can have a powerful effect on their children's lives. Even if they genuinely want you to decide for yourself, you may still feel you should do what you think they would prefer. The death of such a parent can bring a surprising sense of

freedom. You may feel that your mother's or father's death has enabled you to come into your own. For some, this freedom may also be mixed with insecurity, as if your parent is still looking over your shoulder to see what you are doing.

Building for the future

For a while after the death, life may seem to slow down and you may well feel that the world is a much less colourful, safe or pleasant place. You may be very lonely and lost and wonder if these emotions will last for ever. Concentrating and making decisions will be more difficult, and you may be unsure of just who you are and where you stand. If you can, it is often wise to delay making major decisions until you feel stronger.

Grieving takes time – nearly always longer than people expect. Grief tends to come in waves and some days can be very bad, but gradually the pain and distress will lessen and you will begin to feel more yourself again.

Your parents laid the foundations of your personality and gave you many of the building materials to become your own person. You may be like them in some ways, but you will also be different in many others. You may have inherited some of their qualities, but be able to use them in new ways, especially if there were aspects of your parents that you did not like. You may be better at some things than they were and less good at others. You may adopt different ways of thinking or take pride in holding onto many of their ways. You will also have a store of memories that stretch back to your earliest childhood. In this way, although your father or mother is no longer with you, the best part of what he or she meant to you can be built into who you are for the rest of your life.

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How Cruse helps bereaved people

Cruse Bereavement Care is the leading national charity providing bereavement support services in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. We provide advice, information and support to anyone who has been bereaved (children, young people and adults), whenever and however the death has occurred.

Cruse offers face-to-face, telephone, email and website support. We have a national helpline and local services throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland. We also have a website and freephone helpline specifically for children and young people. Our services are provided by trained volunteers and are confidential and free.

Cruse books and publications

Cruse Bereavement Care stocks a wide range of books, leaflets and resources on bereavement. Please visit our website at www.cruse.org.uk or telephone **0208 939 9530** email info@cruse.org.uk

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