

## Grief and the Adult Child

Adults who come from dysfunctional families have learned early in life not to talk, feel, or trust. Because they are controlled by these “rules”, it is very difficult for them to do the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual work necessary to healthily resolve grief.

To do effective grief work grievors must talk about the lost love and the experience of his or her death and allow themselves to feel the resultant pain. Adult children (AC) find it difficult to do either of these. And certainly they cannot trust others to help them. As a result, ACs live with unresolved grief that complicates their already complicated lives.

Four tasks must be accomplished if one is to successfully resolve grief. They are:

Face the reality of the death,

Experience the pain of grief,

Learn to live without your loved one,

Find Meaning in life that does not include the deceased loved one (Worden, 1982).

Most ACs have trouble doing healthy grief work because they can't get past the first two tasks.

Deluding themselves that things are different from what they really are is one of the foremost coping mechanism for ACs. For most of their lives they have denied the reality that dad was an alcoholic, or that mother was mentally ill. They denied that their family was dysfunctional and that the kind of life they lived was abnormal, especially when leaving the difficult situation isn't an option. Using denial helps the AC survive the chaos and pain. It

follows, therefore, that denial and delusion, which allows the AC to live in such a chaotic atmosphere, would be utilized when a loved one dies. But, death is a reality that cannot be denied indefinitely. This denial makes it difficult for ACs to face the reality of the death, and to accomplish the first task.

Because living in chaos is so painful, ACs learned to avoid their feelings. This prevents them from accomplishing the second task; feeling and expressing the emotions of grief. They learned early on to deny feelings of sadness, loss, rejection, pain, regret, guilt and anger; all normal grief reactions. Therefore, as adults, when someone they love dies, they are locked into attempting to avoid or stuff down the painful emotions of grief.

ACs can't understand why they were able to “handle” feelings before, but now they can't. Many ACs turn feelings inward where they are manifested as chronic depression. Other ACs somatize their emotions into physical illnesses.

Hyper responsibility, rigidity, the inability to relax or have fun, the excessive need for others' approval, low self-esteem, fear of abandonment, and perfectionism are only some of the other traits ACs possess. These additional traits complicate mourning for the Adult Child even more.

If grief is to be resolved in a healthy way, one must also deal with problems resulting from a dysfunctional childhood. These problems must be worked at through therapy, and/or appropriate self-help groups. It is essential that the AC work with a therapist who is knowledgeable in the dynamics of grief as well as Adult Child issues.

To help yourself, recognize that your Adult Child traits are likely to interfere with your grief. Be aware that the emotional baggage that you carry will complicate your

grief. Don't allow yourself to deny that you are hurting, or tell others that you are "fine". If you are presently attending a 12 step program, you may find that others in the group aren't able to support you in your grief. Society's denial of death and grief doesn't stop at the door of your self-help meeting. Attend a bereavement support group in addition to your 12 step group. You may have to depend on yourself to bring together the helpful messages from both that will allow you to grieve well, in spite of your AC issues.

Learn to meet your own needs. Identify your feelings, and allow them. Since it is not in your nature to cry or express any emotion in front of others, find ways to do this that are acceptable to you. Cry at the cemetery. Scream in the shower. Keep a journal. Write what you can't say out loud or to another person.

Be patient with yourself. Grief, as well as AC issues, takes time and effort to resolve. Don't expect yourself to be through either in a few months.

Learn stress management techniques. Take care of yourself physically. Watch your diet. Get plenty of rest. Drink eight glasses of water daily. Exercise. Walking is a good way to exercise if you can't get to the gym.

Maintain at least a minimal social life. During early grief you may want to pull inside yourself and not be with others (since your tendency is to deny to others that you feel bad), but make yourself be with your friends once a week or so.

Continue your 12 step program and/or your counseling. A mixture of time for grief and time to work on AC issues is essential. Look for ways to connect the two. Work your program; don't just "talk" it.

Use your Higher Power. Ask Him/Her to help you with your grief as well

as your AC issues. Spend time alone to get in touch with your inner self. Remember too, that prayer and meditation can be a great source of strength and comfort.

Recognize that those around you who may be grieving the same love you are, must do their own grief work. You are not responsible for their pain. You can share thoughts and feelings with them, but you cannot grieve for them.

Persevere through the pain of grief, but also take a break from it occasionally. Be kind to yourself. Go slowly and carefully. Remember, it is okay to fall back into old patterns of behavior for a short time. Actually, when a crisis occurs, most ACs regress into a lower level of functioning for awhile anyway. You have been terribly hurt by this death, give yourself permission to feel "sorry for yourself" occasionally.

Even though it is difficult, you can, with hard work and persistence, resolve your grief. Just as you will grow and change from dealing effectively with Adult Child issues, so too, will you grow and change as a result of a loss well grieved.

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