

WHEN THE AGING OUTLIVE THEIR CHILDREN

No parent expects to outlive his/her child. It simply is not in the natural order of things. When it happens it is viewed as an affront to one's sense of orderliness, justice and fair play.

The death of a child is a terrible tragedy. We are horrified when a young child or young adult dies, but we react with less concern when a middle aged "child" dies. We forget that for a parent, the age of the child has no relevance. We focus our attention on the spouse or the children of the one who has died and ignore, or at least not recognize the pain of the surviving mother or father. But, the pain of their loss is as real and as intense as the pain of a parent whose child was very young. For any parent their child is their child whether he/she is five days or fifty years.

Parental grief is extremely intense and of a long duration; far greater than the grief over the spouse, sibling or a parent. For the aging bereaved parent, in addition to the intense grief at the death of their child, most have, at this time in their lives, experienced other significant losses that intensify their grief.

Many have lost spouses, siblings, or even other children (the loss of an infant or stillborn many years in the past is not to be discounted.) In addition to the losses by death that many have experienced, or are presently experiencing, they have lost their youth, health, and/or independence. Whether we recognize these experiences as losses or not, they are and there is grief that accompanies these losses.

Add the grief at the death of their child to the normal losses and the accompanying grief, and the aging parent may well feel overwhelmed.

As with any bereaved person the emotions of grief must be worked through, but for the aging bereaved parent this may be difficult to do. The issue that is most likely to prevent the aging from dealing with their emotions, especially guilt and anger, is that for the majority of aging people it is not acceptable to openly express emotions. But, this is the most effective way to work through grief.

Another problem facing the aging bereaved parent that makes their grief so difficult to resolve is the lack of support and encouragement to grieve by those around them. Family and friends of the aged bereaved mistakenly believe that it is not healthy for the aged to cry and talk about their lost child. On the contrary, it is the expression of their painful feelings that relieves the emotional

energy of their grief that IS most helpful for them. It is the bottled up emotions that will cause them to become physically ill or hasten their death.s

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For The Parent:

--Know that your physical and emotional reactions to your child's death are normal and that you are not losing your mind, as you may fear. Reading some of the books on the grief process will help you to know that what you are thinking and feeling is to be expected.

--Forget all you have learned about "being strong" and "keeping a stiff upper lip." It is only through crying and expressing the pain you are feeling that you will get some relief. Don't let others tell you to think only of the good things in your life. It is impossible to do. Don't let others keep you busy "so you won't think about it." This won't work either.

--Allow yourself to cry and talk about what you are thinking and feeling. Attend a support group if possible.

--Take especially good care of your health. The stress of your grief could exacerbate any illness you may already have or make you more susceptible to illness. Eat balanced meals. Get plenty of rest (even if you can't sleep). Do some kind of exercise daily, even if it is only walking short distances.

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For Family/Friends:

--Read books on the grieving process so that you will know that the bereaved parent is reacting in a normal way.

--Encourage the parent to talk about their child who has died.

Listen nonjudgementally. Help them sort through what is real and not real in their anger and guilt.

--Remember that birthdays, anniversaries, and other special days will be difficult for the aging bereaved parent. Expect and permit the parent to talk and reminisce about their child to a greater degree on these days.

--Know that their grief may last well over a year. A two to three year duration is not abnormal. Know that for the aging parent, their grief may never be completely over.

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