

# PATHWAYS CENTER

## *for* GRIEF & LOSS

### **SURVIVING THE LOSS OF A PARENT**

No matter what age you are when your parent dies, you will experience grief. Life will be completely different without them. Whether or not you lived with them, saw or spoke to them regularly, or had less frequent contact, you are experiencing a lot of change. The loss of a parent can mean the loss of your connection with your history. Some grievors express feeling untethered, as though they were not secured to a foundation anymore. Whether your grief is intense or mild, the following are suggestions for healing after the loss.

- **ACKNOWLEDGE THE LOSS** – It takes a while to truly grasp the impact of the loss in your life. This is the grief process. It begins with recognizing the relationship you had with the parent who died as well as beginning to account for all of the changes and adjustments that will have to take place. Be gentle with yourself. This is a long process and often times we expect ourselves to proceed through it at a much faster pace than we really do.
- **EXPRESS YOUR FEELINGS** - Throughout your grief journey you may experience many strong and unexpected feelings. Most important is to find your own way of releasing these feelings. Some people are very comfortable talking, others are not. Some people are writers, some are not. Some are readers, some are athletes, artists, musicians ... There are as many ways to express feelings as there are people. Find the way that works for you.
- **PRACTICE SAYING NO** - Friends and family may try to encourage you to “do things”, to “stay busy” and “get over it”. **You** decide when and what you want to do. This may be a powerful time in your life to get in touch with what is most important to you and follow it. “No” is a reasonable response to many questions and offers. Practice.
- **FIND SUPPORT** - As you look around and go through the weeks and months that follow your parent's death, you will realize that certain people are more helpful than others. You will naturally gravitate in their direction. Try to identify what gives you comfort, then seek it. It may be especially helpful to spend time with people who knew your parent. If this is not possible, support groups enable you to connect with others who understand your experience.
- **OBSERVE FAMILY CHANGES** – It is not your job to take care of everyone in the family. When a parent dies, all family members will grieve in their own way, in their own time. Roles in the family will slowly be redefined. Be aware of how relationships were before the death, how they have changed, and where you feel your place is now in the family. Communication and compromise are critical during this time of transition.
- **CONNECT WITH PEOPLE WHO KNEW YOUR PARENT(S)** - It is wonderful to find people who remember your family. They can offer stories, memories, and pictures of favorite experiences shared with your parent. Often times, this allows you to see a side of your parent you may not have been as aware of when they were living. Collect the memories and keep them in a safe place to look at and reflect upon.

*(over)*

- **CREATE RITUALS** - Rituals help you acknowledge and mourn the loss. They symbolize what you and others in your family take with you from the person who has died as you move forward in your life. Be creative and design a ritual that reflects your relationship with the person who died. It may be as simple as lighting a candle and spending a minute remembering them or as grand as offering an opportunity for others to share their memories in the form of a service.
- **LOOK AHEAD** - Some say “let go and get over it”, but looking ahead isn’t that. It means holding all that is important to you about the person who died and incorporating that into your life as you continue to live. Consider what you are learning about yourself as you figure out how to cope with this loss. Review the traits and life lessons you gleaned from your parent to determine how you will uphold their ideals that you also value.

If this is your first parent to die, not only are you grieving, but you may be feeling helpless as you observe your surviving parent’s grief. Perhaps you feel a sense of responsibility towards your surviving parent. This can be overwhelming and you may find it hard to focus on your own grief. If this was your second parent to die you may be re-visiting who you are now that you are the oldest generation in your immediate family. Remember grieving is hard work – it is physically, psychologically, emotionally and cognitively exhausting. Take care of and be gentle with yourself. Those same memories that currently bring you to tears will, in time, be a source of comfort and may even bring a smile.