

# WHAT YOU MIGHT NOT EXPECT

**When we lose a parent, we expect to be sad and we expect we will miss our parent,** but what catches us by surprise are the things we do not expect when we lose a parent. There are unexpected losses, and you need help with how to cope with them. Whatever your expectations are when you experience the loss of a parent, reality will be different. Your grief experience will be unique to any of your friends or family and will be based on the circumstances of the death, your emotional make-up, and the nature and quality of your relationship with your parent.



**Many grief reactions may catch you by surprise.** As a Chaplain I attended the death of a father in his early 60's who left behind a wife and a sizable number of adult children and spouses in their late 20's to early 40's. I observed several expected grief reactions including crying, sobbing, and extreme sadness. In addition, I saw a few things I did not expect. During a two-hour period following the death of their father I saw one adult child run screaming to the bathroom, lock herself in and refuse to come out. I saw one sibling shortly after the death walk to the refrigerator and make themselves a sandwich. Another sibling asked the nurse if she could help bathe and dress her father into clean clothes. One sibling and her spouse brought a cardboard box from the garage and began walking through the house collecting possessions of the father they wanted to keep, creating an argument between several of the siblings that escalated into physical pushing, shoving and some very serious name-calling! Losing a parent can elicit a variety of responses, many of which you never expect to see.



**You may not expect to feel your loss physically.** Fatigue and a general lack of energy is common with the loss of a parent. You may feel a hollowness in your stomach or even a stomachache. Heart palpitations, trembling, shaking, nervousness, agitation, and irritability are not uncommon. As thoughts of shock and numbness wear off, they may be followed by physical symptoms of emptiness and heaviness. It is likely that your regular sleep pattern will be interrupted.

*Help yourself physically by staying grounded and taking care of your physical needs. Grounding is about creating ways to stay in touch with reality when your mind takes over and drags you into worst case scenario thinking. When you feel yourself spinning into fear and anxiety, take deep breaths, recite your contact information, describe out loud your surroundings, or ask someone nearby to talk with you to distract your spiraling thoughts. Get outside and go for a walk to get exercise and your blood flowing. Sunshine, a cool breeze, deep breaths of fresh air, healthy food, and quality sleep will all help you grieve well physically.*

**You may not expect for your loss to affect your relationships.** Losing a parent may draw you closer to your siblings, or disagreements about how to handle a funeral, service, or possessions belonging to your parent may pull you apart. Grief creates irritability and moodiness and can make communication difficult and misunderstandings more likely. Grieving the loss of a parent can make you want to isolate and increase anti-social behaviors. You may hear others describe you as having changed and wishing they could get the “old you” back.

*Anticipate the emotional pain and resulting frustration that grief and loss creates among family and friend systems and be proactive to simplify as much as possible. Lowering expectations will go a long way to heading off relational trouble. Keep life as uncomplicated as possible. You will need high levels of empathy to see the loss from the perspective of those in your relational bubble. Put yourself in the shoes of others and do your best to understand how grief is affecting them because it affects everyone differently.*

**You may not expect your loss to dominate your thoughts so completely.** Grieving the loss of a parent can destroy your ability to concentrate. Organizational skills may seem to have disappeared along with your memory and the ability to recall facts or details. Constant thoughts of your parent and a preoccupation with the death can make it difficult to make decisions. You may find it difficult to believe the death has actually happened. In some cases, a grieving person believes their loved one is “visiting” them as they can sense their presence nearby.



*When your mind races or is filled with thoughts about your loss, exercise the mental muscle of choosing the thoughts upon which you want to focus. Practice choosing a specific positive memory of your loved one and hold that thought in your mind not allowing it to escape and be replaced by another. This will also help with traumatic thoughts and images. Use the principle of replacement to choose the healthier thought and the mental muscle to hold it. It will also be helpful to break tasks or projects down into very small parts you can complete easily in a short time. Less is more!*

**You may not expect to reflect so much about yourself.** Losing a parent can cause you to reflect on what your parent meant to you in terms of influence, sense of self, friendship, acceptance, and love. It can also surface negative feelings of being abandoned, devalued, abused, judged, or ignored. You may wonder how much the impact of your parents shaped the person you have become, and thoughts of re-evaluating your priorities, adopting new goals, or making changes in your life would be a normal reaction.

*Use this time and these thoughts to consider the positive qualities you have that you owe to your parent and find space for gratitude as you reflect. If you are considering changes, allow them to rise from a place of appreciation and love for the person you want to become. Your grief journey may afford you the opportunity to offer grace, mercy, and forgiveness for hurt or pain generated by your parent. The work you will be doing is as much about healing your heart as establishing blame and seeking justice for pain caused.*

