



CANCERcare®

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fact sheet

COPING WITH THE LOSS OF A PARENT FROM CANCER

A parent passing away at any age can be one of the most significant losses that an individual will encounter. It can be accompanied by a longing for more time, experiences and connection with your parent. Acknowledging and understanding that parents will most likely pass away before their children does not diminish or prepare families for the sense of loss felt at the time of death.

HERE ARE SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR COPING WITH THE LOSS OF A PARENT

Recognize the scope of your loss.

Coping with the loss of a parent means learning to live without a person you have known for your whole life who may have played a formative role in your growth and development. Parents have shared in important moments in your life and have been invested in your well-being.

Allow yourself to grieve. After the loss of a parent you may feel angry, upset, numb, depressed and anxious, all of which can be intense and unfamiliar. All of these feelings are appropriate given the scale of the loss. Grief is a uniquely individual experience and different people, even within the same family, will process loss and express emotion in different ways at different times.

Give yourself time. Understand that there are no fixed timelines for the grief process and that patience is important. Acknowledge and embrace emotion without feeling that you need to “get over” your feelings or move on. When it feels comfortable to do so, find the time to reflect on the past and hold onto memories.



Pay attention to your health. Grief is overwhelming and exhausting, both physically and emotionally. Nourishment and sleep can be restorative. Your doctor may be able to assist you in understanding physical symptoms and offer reassurance and comfort at a time when you're not feeling like yourself.”

Reach out to supportive people.

Work to identify your needs and specify how those who care about you can be helpful. Engage family members, friends, neighbors, people in your community, people at your place of worship and co-workers. Understand the difference between those who are comfortable and open to conversations about your parent and those who may be able to offer to help with practical tasks.

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Plan for occasions when you may need more support. Feelings may be magnified on birthdays, anniversaries, Mother's Day, Father's Day and other holidays. Think about how you want to honor your parent on these days. Create new rituals or support old traditions with family members and/or friends, and mark or observe the day in ways that can bring comfort to you.

Seek extra support. Consider professional support from a grief counselor or oncology social worker to help strengthen existing coping mechanisms and establish additional strategies for understanding and navigating your grief. Look into support groups, which allow you to connect with other people who are coping with the loss of a parent. CancerCare offers free individual counseling and support groups to people who have lost a loved one to cancer. Call 800-813-HOPE (4673) and speak to an oncology social worker to learn more about CancerCare's free services.

Hold on to your memories and begin a new legacy. Though death separates you from a parent physically, your emotional connection continues to exist and grow through memory. Think about your parent's strengths and the impact that they had on your life and the lives of others. You may wish to honor your parent's memory by volunteering for cancer organizations or involving yourself in a cause that your parent felt passionately about. Consider creative outlets and keep memories present through mindfulness, writing, drawing, collaging or creating slideshows. Commemorating and honoring your parent—through activities or projects of any size—can help you cope with the grieving process and heal.

CancerCare® Can Help

Founded in 1944, CancerCare is the leading national organization providing free support services and information to help people manage the emotional, practical and financial challenges of cancer. Our comprehensive services include counseling and support groups over the phone, online and in-person, educational workshops, publications and financial and co-payment assistance. All CancerCare services are provided by professional oncology social workers and world-leading cancer experts.

To learn more, visit www.cancercare.org or call **800-813-HOPE (4673)**.

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