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0521813387 - Death of a Parent: Transition to a New Adult Identity

Debra Umberson

Excerpt

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Ginger describes her father as a gregarious man, a man full of life. She was always close to him and recalls a childhood filled with happiness and love. As an adult, Ginger remained closely involved with her parents and was especially likely to turn to her father for advice. When Ginger's father died of a heart attack eleven months before our interview, she felt emotionally undone. She missed him profoundly and was worried about her seventy-two-year-old mother, who was devastated by the loss of her husband. In the midst of grief, Ginger was in a car accident and broke her back. At the same time, she was struggling in a marriage that left her feeling emotionally isolated.

While the situation appeared bleak, Ginger was slowly undergoing a personal transformation that would turn her life around. This transformation was inspired by the death of her father, by the kind of person her father was, and by her past relationship with him. Ginger did a lot of thinking as she lay flat on her back in a hospital bed:

My father was always very enthusiastic. He did so much. He was always involved. He always felt that you can just sit around and watch other people have a good time or you can

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do it yourself. . . . It just reminded me that, “Hey, life goes on honey.” You can sit home and be miserable and get fat or you can do something. So I’ve lost thirty pounds since then. I really got control of my own life again. Control that I had given away for a while. My father’s death was the catalyst that finally got me out of an unhealthy marriage.

Ginger, like many bereaved adults, experienced a turning point in her life and in her view of self after her father died. She is a changed person. She is more like the person she wants to be, and that makes her happy. The person she wants to be is very much shaped by who her father was. Ginger absorbed the parts of her father that she admired — healthy qualities of her father’s that now live on in Ginger’s personality. As she began to live life more fully, becoming more similar to her father, Ginger realized that her marriage did not allow her to be the person she wanted to be. As a result, Ginger divorced her husband. Leaving her husband meant abandoning parts of her personality that she did not admire and reclaiming parts of herself that were hidden and in need of acknowledgment.

In spite of the positive outcome, this has not been an easy time for Ginger. The divorce was difficult and she continues to deal with her mother’s intense grief. Ginger’s parents had a good marriage and her mother’s loss is the most challenging aspect of coping with her father’s death:

My mother was so devastated by it all. . . . She’s still really grieving. And that was the most difficult for me – to see her grief. . . . This is something that I could not help her with and that hurt a lot.

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Ginger now checks in on her mother almost daily and is more nurturing and protective of her. Ginger is experiencing some role reversal with her mother and feels “more the parent now than ever before.” Taking care of a surviving parent can be very stressful for adults, but Ginger’s newfound strength and renewed satisfaction with her life since her father’s death ease the difficulty of caring for her mother. She explains, “My dad’s death brought home to me that life is pretty short and you should spend the time with your family…Don’t wait, don’t put it off.”

Embracing her father’s personal qualities has made Ginger a happier and more confident person: “He’s always a part of me. What he gave me and helped me develop into. There will always be that part of him in me.”

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ORDINARY LOSS, EXTRAORDINARY CHANGE

A myth supported by most theories of pre-adult development is that at the end of adolescence you get yourself together and, as a normal, mature adult, you enter into a relatively stable, integrated life pattern that can continue more or less indefinitely. This is a rather cruel illusion since it leads people in early adulthood to believe that they are, or should be, fully adult and settled, and that there are no more major crises or developmental changes ahead.

PSYCHOLOGIST DANIEL LEVINSON AND COLLEAGUES¹

You can expect to feel terrible for a while.... You won't know what a parent's death is like until it happens to you.... It may be a common experience but common experiences can have profound effects.

JAMES, AGE THIRTY-EIGHT

It was unusual for a middle-aged adult to have a living parent only a few decades ago. Today, it is common. In fact, parents are not expected to die until they reach old age; it is not unusual now for the lifespans of parents and children to overlap by a period of fifty years or more. At the same time, childhood has changed over time in Western cultures so that the period of our dependency on

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parents is longer than ever before. Thus it is often not until we begin, as adults, to confront our own aging at the same time that we experience the busiest years of our family lives and careers that a parent is likely to die.

Before we have experienced the death of a parent, we may expect that this will be a fairly minor milestone in our adult development. In fact, we may implicitly believe that once we reach adulthood, particularly if we have children of our own, that our development is more or less complete. We do not expect that there will be major changes in the way we experience the world or react to it. The research on which this book is based, however, demonstrates that the loss of a parent has profound and wide-ranging consequences for most of us.

Adults expect their parents to precede them in death, yet still the loss is jolting. Very few people who have not lost a parent anticipate the impact of this experience. Friends, coworkers, and even relatives often minimize the extent of loss felt by adults following a parent's death. Until recently, the popular perception has been that psychologically healthy adults who lose a parent do not suffer lasting psychological consequences. Friends and coworkers expect us to quickly recover, resume our usual social roles, and emerge largely unchanged shortly following such a loss. Some people presume that adults who are emotionally undone by a parent's death must have had emotional problems to begin with. The research presented in this book contradicts this view and shows that ordinary adults are strongly affected and changed by the loss of a parent.

The death of a parent is a turning point in the emotional, personal, and social lives of most adults – an event that initiates a period of substantial change and redirection in the way we view ourselves, our relationships to others, and our place in the

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world. In turn, change in the self has important consequences for change in the structure and dynamics of families. In Ginger's case, she made a conscious decision to become more like her admired father. This new view of herself as a happier and more confident person was incompatible with her marital persona; as a result, she divorced her husband. As many of the men and women who agreed to be interviewed about their experiences with a parent's death can attest, the consequences are both highly individual and far-reaching. An individual who feels liberated by the death of a parent, for example, may decide to get the divorce they had desired but avoided for fear of that parent's disapproval; this, in turn, disrupts family structures. In another case, after a family matriarch dies, an adult child may adopt the deceased mother's roles and responsibilities in order to create and maintain a newly structured extended family.

We are beginning to understand the extent to which a parent's death, even if it occurs during adulthood, affects adults' well-being. The death of a parent imposes an unexpected crisis for most healthy, well-functioning adults. This crisis can result in high levels of psychological distress, increased risk for depression, impaired physical health, or increased alcohol consumption. These effects go largely unrecognized by everyone except those going through the loss, and the bereaved often assume that they are unusual in their strong response to the loss. Most adults are surprised by the intensity and persistence of their reactions, and are thrown off balance when their distress fuels changes in their interpersonal relationships, behaviors, social roles, and even in the ways in which they view themselves.

A central message of this book is that it is quite normal for parental death to have profound effects on ordinary people. Stringent statistical tests of national survey data show that parental

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death adversely affects psychological well-being for most adults. Yet the form that the reaction to a parent's death takes is highly individualized. For a small but not insignificant group of individuals, the effect may even be more positive than negative. This usually occurs when adults lose an extremely critical or dysfunctional parent. This sort of loss can be freeing to an adult whose self-image was long undermined by the parent. But even when the effects are positive, individuals experience significant *change* following a parent's death. Clearly, no adult should realistically expect a parent's death to leave them unaltered.

The loss of a parent represents a rite of passage into a new adult identity. Most rites of passage involve formal rituals that mark the passages. Recognition of the steps bringing us nearer to our adulthood takes many forms, ranging from First Communion and Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremonies to a legal change in one's rights and responsibilities: drinking, driving a car, registering with the Selective Service. We announce weddings, for instance, in the newspaper, hold bridal showers and bachelor parties, give gifts to outfit the newlyweds' new home, and may even mark our new status and how it affects our relationship with others by changing our name. We mark births with parties and gifts, and arrange leaves of absence from our jobs; we prepare physically and emotionally by attending childbirth preparation classes or reading several of hundreds of books on how having a child changes your life. The death of an adult's parent, however, is characterized by minimal public recognition. The only formal rite of passage is that associated with any death: typically a funeral, a memorial service, or a burial.

Informally, however, many important transitions occur. For example, bereaved adults experience a change in relationships with others, in psychological well-being, in health behaviors,

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and in the view of themselves as adults who are no longer children. Anthropologist Robbie Davis-Floyd argues that a chief characteristic of rites of passage is a “gradual psychological ‘opening’ … to profound interior change.”² This “opening” characterizes adults as they make the final transition into adulthood. The death of a parent launches a period of self-reflection and the transformation of adult identity.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

I became interested in parental death after several years of studying ongoing relationships between adult children and their parents. Once I began to talk about my interest in the impact of parental death, it seemed that whomever I talked with had a story to tell about their loss and its life-altering impact. My own mother once told me that she thinks about her mother every day even though her mother died nearly thirty years ago. She still considers how her mother might advise her when she makes important decisions or faces difficult times. Shortly after that conversation with my mother, she almost died during a surgical procedure. This personal experience forced me to think about what her death would mean to me. I searched the library for research on parental loss in adulthood and was surprised to find almost no information. Finally, I decided to conduct my own study on the effects of losing a parent. Now, after ten years and scores of discussions with adults who have lost their parents, I have clear evidence that a parent’s death is a life-altering event for most adults.

This book is based on evidence from several different sources and combines different research methodologies. First, I investigated the general effects of a parent’s death on physical and psychological health, as well as on certain types of relationships,

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using data from a large national survey of individuals in the United States. This type of statistical analysis provides information about the general effects of a parent's death on an adult's health, well-being, and relationships.³ The overall survey was designed to focus on the link between social involvement and health. Relationships with parents were a significant component of the survey. Survey participants were interviewed in 1986, 1989, and 1994. Between 1986 and 1989, some 204 of the 3,614 individuals originally interviewed experienced the death of a parent. These unique data allowed me to look at individuals both before and after the death of their parent, as well as to compare their health and relationships with those of their nonbereaved peers. I also carried my analysis forward to the 1994 interview to determine whether the effects of parent death so apparent in 1989 persist over time. The national survey is demographically representative of adults in the general U.S. population, so the results about the effects of parental death from the survey are generalizable to adults in the United States.

The national data provide striking statistical evidence that a parent's death has substantial effects on ordinary individuals; however, they provide little insight into the social and psychological processes through which a parent's death affects physical and psychological health, relationships, and self-perceptions. I conducted in-depth interviews with seventy-three adults who had recently lost a parent in order to take a closer look at these processes.

I began the second phase of research by talking with a reporter from the local newspaper about my findings on parental death from the national survey. The reporter then wrote a story on parental death and mentioned that I would be continuing the study by conducting personal interviews with individuals who had lost a parent in the previous three years. My office phone number

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was included in the story. I hoped to interview about twenty-five people, so I decided to be available at my office the day the story appeared. It was a Sunday morning; two of my graduate students and I showed up armed with bagels and tall cups of coffee, half expecting to spend the morning just chatting and hoping for the phone to ring. Three hours later, we had the names of about 200 individuals who were willing to be interviewed. We hardly had time to collect names, numbers, and a bit of background information from each person before we had to stop to answer other phones. Many of the people who called in were relieved to know that they were not the only ones to be deeply affected by the loss of a parent. Over the next several weeks, I received about fifty more calls from individuals who finally got around to reading that Sunday's paper.

Of course, the type of person who volunteers to talk about an emotional topic such as parent loss might be more outgoing or distressed than the average bereaved person. In an effort to reduce this type of self-selection bias in our in-depth interview sample, we made an effort to interview a range of individuals, diverse with respect not only to their level of emotional distress but to their age, gender, race, and socioeconomic status. We also conducted a mail survey of 117 bereaved adults who called in but who were not interviewed in person.⁴

Combining qualitative and quantitative research methodologies in this way enhances our understanding of peoples' experiences, because each methodology bears certain strengths and limitations. Statistical analyses of data from the national survey, for example, can be used to determine whether adults who experienced a parent's death became more depressed over time than adults who did not have this experience. But numbers alone cannot fully convey the emotions and meanings underlying reactions to loss. Qualitative data, drawn from in-depth, personal