Death of a Parent

Transition to a New Adult Identity

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Cambridge University Press

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

http://www.cambridge.org

First published 2003

Printed in the United States of America

Typefaces Goudy 11.5/16 pt., FC Village, and OPTISerlio *System* LaTeX 2ε [TB]

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Umberson, Debra.
Death of a parent : transition to a new adult identity / Debra Umberson.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-521-81338-7
1. Parents – Death – Psychological aspects. 2. Loss (Psychology)
3. Adulthood – Psychological aspects. I. Title.
BF789.D4 U48 2003
155.9′37′0854–dc21 2002035084

ISBN 0 521 81338 7 hardback

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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 COLLEAGUES[1]

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

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

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

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,

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,

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

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

interviews with the bereaved were needed to assess the subjective meanings and dynamic processes associated with the statistical patterns revealed in the national survey data, in other words, how the people interviewed actually feel about the death of their parent, and how the experience has changed their lives. The qualitative data were derived from careful analysis of detailed, in-depth descriptions of bereavement experiences that adults provided in their own words. These detailed descriptions provide insight into the underlying dynamics and processes that lead to increased levels of depression and personal change among the bereaved.

Throughout my research, I considered group differences in the response to parent loss. I analyzed data from the national survey to assess for gender, race, socioeconomic status, and age differences in the effects of a parent's death on individuals. Although gender differences in the experience of parent loss are a consistent theme throughout this book, the national data reveal that the effects of the loss on mental health, physical health, and relationships rarely differ on the basis of race, socioeconomic status, or the age of adults. Neither were group differences, outside of gender, apparent in my in-depth interviews with the bereaved. Although family culture and expressions of grief may vary across racial and ethnic groups, my study suggests that the experience of losing a parent is similar across racial and ethnic groups in the United States. Bill, an African American man, emphasizes just what the data suggest: that the response to parent loss does not much differ across racial groups:

> My wife says . . . I have never been a very communicative person. . . . But when I saw that article about your study I went ahead and called. I didn't know if it was going to be really helpful. I didn't know what the purpose of the study

> was, but I did want someone to know that black people grieve just like anybody else. Even though I'm a man and I'm forty-four, I was very close to my mother and yes, I cried, and I still cry because I lost my mother.

Although I cannot say, definitively, that African Americans, white adults, and other racial and ethnic groups in the United States experience parent loss in similar ways, the evidence points strongly in that direction. What seems to be more important in shaping individual responses to parent loss, in addition to gender of the parent and adult child, is the adult's unique life history, a history that reflects a lifetime of interactions with the parent.

Individuals and Bereavement

Social scientists who rely heavily on numbers and averages in their research are sometimes apt to lose touch with the people they are studying. It is not so easy to lose touch with these human realities when one combines the sterile analyses of survey data with in-depth personal interviews, as I did in this study. When I interviewed each bereaved adult, a personal life story unfolded, a story that began with a young child and his or her relationship to a parent, a story that moved through a life course, with all of its ups and downs, a story that ended with the loss of a significant person. Some of these stories were warm, loving, and full of humor, while others were characterized by conflict, neglect, and emotional pain. As I listened, the adult in front of me was often transformed into a small child describing his or her childhood thoughts and feelings about a parent. It is to those young children and the adults within whom they reside that I owe this book and my own personal growth that resulted from this experience.

This book is intended for several audiences. First, this book is for individuals who are coping with the loss of their own parent or for those who have friends and loved ones who are coping with loss. This information may better equip the bereaved to recognize their own responses to a parent's death and why they are changing in particular ways. It may also serve as a guide to help individuals channel their distress and personal change in desired directions. This book is also designed for scholars of adult development and the life course, family relationships and relationship loss, and intergenerational relationships. For those who want a fuller understanding of how the research project and statistical procedures were handled, technical information about research procedures is in the appendix. This book is also for the physicians, therapists, clergy, and other professionals who are often called on to assist bereaved individuals in coping with loss. Although the death of a parent is similar in many respects to other significant losses, this loss is unique, particularly in its impact on the family and as a transitional event in adult development.

Finally, it is not only adults who care about their parents. Parents feel like parents no matter how old their children are. Several years ago, I received a letter from an eighty-six-year-old father who had just read an article about my research. His response was to worry about his "children"; he wrote, "I know [I will die] in a very short time, although I am OK now. . . . Do you have any suggestions?? I will leave a very large loving and caring family." I was moved by this father's concern about his adult children and I wrote to him right away. I hope that parents may find in this book some ways of preparing their adult children for this almost inevitable loss.