

## Losing an Adult Child

When a young child dies there is an immense outpouring of sympathy from everyone and the very thought of a child dying carries so much hurt that people want to gather around the parents and show their concern. Strangely though, when an adult child dies and the older parent is the survivor, the attitude can be very different.

When Mary was told that her son, aged 57, had died at work from a heart attack she simply could not believe the words. She said that she was stunned, thought her heart would stop, found she couldn't breathe, and yet she responded and asked when it had happened, who was with him, where was his body, and did his wife and children know. She said that she moved her emotions to her daughter-in-law and felt that was where the grief should be focused. At the funeral home she watched as everyone moved to the side of her son's family to offer condolences. Some people came over to Mary in what she said appeared as an "afterthought". She said that she felt totally alone in this grief and she also felt that she should not be looking for anything extraordinary since she was old and having lived so long was expected to understand better than the younger family members what death was all about.

But the hurt of losing a child knows no age barrier and the number of years lived will not make a child's death any easier. It is as devastating for an 80-year-old as it is for a 30-year-old. And, in many ways grief becomes a much lonelier path for the older parent. Many older parents are alone since the spouse had died. Many live on their own with their other children spread out across the country. Many seldom see their grandchildren in these hectic times of school, work, and other interests. Many have lost their contemporaries through death and many no longer are in their own homes, but are now in nursing homes or residences for older people. Sometimes, there is a feeling of isolation that separates them from the rest of the world.

*"I found that there was no one I could talk to – my friends didn't know what to say and my family didn't want to upset me."* mentioned Mary.

When her son died, she was living in her own home but approaching a time when she would have to move to a facility which could offer some extra care for her failing health. She was reluctant to leave her home because she had memories of her son in everything she saw there – in the yard, the living room, the big kitchen table where her family had solved the problems of the world over a hearty meal and a good laugh. Now it was all gone and her soul was empty.

But, with her son's death she was prompted to sell her home and move to smaller quarters. She found this, coupled with the death, too much to cope with and she fell into ill health. With the shock of death, it is important to time any new changes such as a move with utmost care. Perhaps, her family simply didn't realize the depth of her sorrow because she was so quiet in her grief.

Because there is so much going on at the time of a death, family members may not realize how intense an older person's grief really is and it may be dismissed as just another condition of the aging process. In the case of a grandmother whose grandson was killed suddenly in an



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accident, the family didn't realize that the glassy stare and lack of words were really a state of shock. It is extremely important that the older parent or grandparent be given attention and help at the time of a death and in the months and years to follow.

Bereaved Families of Ontario is here not just for young families, but also for the older parent who has lost a child. Sometimes that contact is a vital link in coping with a death that is so difficult to comprehend. Bereaved Families of Ontario is here to help.

Just being able to talk to someone about the lost hopes and dreams can help to ease the pain.

*~ From "Time to Remember" by Barbara Klich*