

Adult Orphan: Loss of a Second Parent
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Definition of adult orphan:

“We tend to associate orphan with children but the reality is that anyone who has no surviving parents is really an orphan.”

By the time we reach age sixty-two, 75 percent of adults have lost both parents (Brooks, 1999).

What adult orphans grieve:

- Loss of person
- Youth
- Other parent
- Family of origin
- Own mortality
- Secondary losses

Why do I feel like an orphan? (Brooks, 1999)

- The adult orphan is not ready to lose the security and strength the parents provided
- There’s an aloneness felt like never before. These are the people who care about you beyond anything you can imagine.
- Relationship with parents is the first significant one.
- Our parents’ values and their experiences are tightly bound into the fabric of our being
- Even if an adult child doesn’t rely on their parent, just knowing the parent is available is important.

Family of origin

John DeBerry, bereavement coordinator of the Northwestern Memorial Hospice Program in Chicago, explains, “When we lose a child, we lose our future. When we lose a peer, we lose the present, but when we lose our parents, we lose our past.” (Brooks, 1999)

Confronting our mortality

As long as there’s one parent still alive, I can still be a child. One writer stated that he doesn’t actually think we think of ourselves as adults until our parents die (Brooks, 1999). While the parent(s) is still alive, we have a buffer that has shielded us from our own death, and then we come face-to-face with our own mortality.

When the last parent has died, the adult now feels a sense of responsibility as the eldest generation now to carry on with family tradition.

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Grieving process for adult whose parent has been sick or terminally ill:

- When someone is dying, you can help complete the last chapter of their life by
 - Asking questions
 - Encouraging parent to tape an oral history
 - Write up on paper a time line of important dates and events
- Grieving may begin before the death
- When a parent is lingering from an extended/terminal illness, a child may feel/think/wish that the parent would die. A nurse said: “Ambivalent feelings are common among people who tend a dying person. It doesn’t come from a desire to hasten death, but from feelings of profound helplessness.” (Bartocci, 2000).

It’s not always obvious which parent we are grieving when the last parent dies (Brooks, 1999).

What helps people through the grief

- Story Telling
- Rituals and ceremonies
 - a. Write a eulogy
 - b. Keep a physical symbol
 - c. Memorial service &/or funeral
- Legacy of Traditions
 - a. Celebrate birthdays and holidays

Styles of Mourning

- Men
 - a. Keep pain to themselves
 - b. Go off alone to mourn
 - c. Take physical and legal action
 - d. Become feverishly busy with activity
- Women
 - a. Spend time with others and share grief
 - b. Share verbal and physical touch

Inheritance

- When the last parent dies, one of the most difficult tasks we face is the division of family property. An estate attorney stated that the tangible goods (jewelry, china, silver, etc.) generate the most friction (Brooks, 1999).

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Changing Relationships

- Sibling relationships
- Only child
- Spousal
- Grandchildren
- Friends

Taking care of ourselves

- Physical health
- Emotional health
- New life decisions
 - New careers
 - New relationships
 - Resurgence of creative energy
 - New hobbies
 - Charity work and volunteerism

We find that parents don't leave us, they become a part of us (Bartocci, 2000).

As Rabbi Harold Kushner, who wrote *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, said when interviewed regarding the death of his son, **“The death of somebody you love is so painful and tragic precisely because life is so precious. By hurting so deeply, you are affirming the value of life”** (Davis Prend, 1997).

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References

Books:

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- Brooks, J. (1999). *Midlife Orphan – Facing Life’s Changes Now That Your Parents Are Gone*. New York: Berkley.
- Bartocci , B. (2000). *Nobody’s Child Anymore*. Indiana: Sorin Books.
- Davis Prend, A. (1997). *Transcending Loss – Understanding the Lifelong Impact of Grief and How to Make It Meaningful*. New York: Berkley.
- Schreiber, L. (2004, November). When a Parent Dies. *O Magazine*, 189-194.

Resources

Books:

- Gilbert, R. (1999). *Finding Your Way After Your Parent Dies*. Indiana: Ave Maria Press, Inc.
- Secunda, V. (2000) *Losing Your Parents, Finding Your Self – The Defining Turning Point of Adult Life*. New York: Hyperion.
- Levy, A. (1999). *The Orphaned Adult – Understanding and Coping with Grief and Change After the Death of Our Parents*. Massachusetts: Perseus Books.
- Myers, E. (1997). *When Parents Die: A Guide for Adults*. New York: Penguin Group.

Support groups:

- Solace House, www.SolaceHouse.org