HOSPICE
RED RIVER VALLEY

Parenting
GRIEF AND LOSS

When we hear of being widowed, we usually think of the elderly. When we talk of single-parent households, we often associate it with divorce, or perhaps those never married. Until recently, little attention has been given to the widowed women and men who are grieving the death of a spouse while also parenting children and teens at home. With the death of a spouse come many changes. Not only is the surviving parent grieving the loss of a partner, but he/she is also grieving many profound changes in his/her life, including the loss of hopes and dreams.

Often, one does not know what is expected. The surviving spouse has few role models since his/her family and friends usually have not been widowed while parenting. The surviving parent often expresses that these new challenges seem unfamiliar and often frightening.

The Challenge of Grieving as a Parent

Almost all surviving parents express concern for their grieving children. They know that they need to deal with their own grief, yet they are concerned about how the death of a spouse impacts their children. Finding a balance is difficult.

First, find your time to grieve and mourn. There is no right or wrong way to grieve, so do what feels right for you. You may have a range of emotions, from anger and sadness, guilt and anxiety to denial and acceptance. Give yourself time to sort out your thoughts and talk with family and friends about your grief feelings.

Pay attention to your needs. You cannot help facilitate your children's grief unless you are attending to your own grief as well. Consider joining a grief support group for parents, where you will have permission to share your feelings and concerns with widows and widowers who are also parenting.

Second, acknowledge your children's feelings. Have a basic knowledge of the developmental stages of your children and how they may understand death, yet remember each child's response and coping style is unique.

Listen attentively and encourage questions. Provide simple, direct, honest and calm explanations to their questions and concerns. One of their greatest fears is that of being abandoned and deserted. Therefore, reassure your children that they will be taken care of, loved and cherished.

Hug and hold your children. Non-verbal communication is the most powerful and direct way of telling children you care.

Explain that the loss is not your children's fault. Discourage their magical thinking, such as when they believe an argument they had with their deceased parent caused the death and they quietly carry the guilt. Accept their expressions of guilt or regret, but offer reassurance and gently tell them that they did not cause the death. Continue to discipline and maintain usual limits and routines. Consistency is crucial as your children adapt to the changes.

Remember your loved one. Explore ways that both you and your children can remember your spouse and embrace those memories. This reassures your children that "dead" does not mean "forgotten," and it allows for their parent to live on in their memories.

The Challenge of Parenting Alone

Surviving parents often express that they are not prepared for the challenge of raising their children alone, and find it to be an overwhelming responsibility. They yearn for the support and advice of their deceased partner. They miss having someone to talk to. Loss impacts the entire family system; roles and responsibilities within the family change. Eventually, the family will find new ways to live together, yet life feels so different.

Even though losing a companion and needing to parent alone is difficult, with time and patience it usually gets easier. Be comfortable with the fact that you will make some mistakes. Delay, if possible, making any major changes until you are thinking more clearly and until you and your children have adjusted to a "new normal."

Pay attention to your feelings. At times, you may resent your changed life, and you may even resent your children. These feelings are normal. Acknowledge your feelings and make time for yourself. Don't be afraid to ask for help and accept help and support when offered. Again, consider joining a support group for parents, where others can offer support and validation. If you are worried that you are not coping well with all the changes, seek professional help.

The Challenge of Changed Relationships

Even though we need time alone to grieve our loss, we also need to ease our loneliness by being with others. After the death of a spouse, we need the on-going support of family and friends. However, expect changes in your relationships.

Your parents may react by becoming too protective and over-involved in hopes of "trying to make you feel better," just as they did when you were a child. For your parents in-law, you and your children are their connection to their deceased son or daughter. After the death, you may feel that they are interfering too much, or feel that they are avoiding you, wishing not to interfere or wanting to deny the death.

It's necessary to let your family know what you need and want so you can feel emotionally safe with them. Gently, set boundaries. Together, talk about the profound changes that all of you are experiencing, and how you can support each other as well as your children. Since you are no longer a couple, your married friends may not know how to include you in their lives and may call less frequently. You may have friends mistakenly think that you should grieve alone, or become impatient thinking you should "get over it." Then, there are those who themselves are grieving the death and don't know what to say to you; consequently, they don't call.

Grief needs expression. Seek out at least a few good friends who will listen and support you. Acknowledge your loss—tell and retell your story. Reminisce and use your loved one's name. The more you tell your story, the more real it becomes. That's when healing begins.

Hospice of the Red River Valley has many resources available for the public, on a loan basis, through the resource libraries in each of our offices. Topics include caregiving, terminal illness, dying, death, grief and loss. For more information about grief and loss, visit our website: www.hrrv.org or call us at (800) 237-4629.

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