FINDING HOPE

After The Death Of Your Parent

WOMEN'S EDITION



Jason Troyer, PhD

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Finding Hope
After the Death
of Your Parent
WOMEN'S VERSION
By Jason Troyer, PhD





To the reader,

I can't express how sorry I am for your loss. Most women find the death of a parent, even if it was expected, to be challenging. I wrote this booklet to provide you with comfort, hope, and information following the death of a parent. I have included information about common grief reactions and responses, strategies for helping yourself, and other topics. I have even more information listed on my website: www.GriefPlan.com.

I hope this booklet will be helpful to you as you mourn the death of your parent.

Sincerely,

JASON TROYER, PHD www.GriefPlan.com

Finding Hope After the Death of Your Parent - Women's Version Jason Troyer

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This book is not designed to replace information from a mental health professional or a physician. The reader should consult an appropriate professional in matters relating to his or her physical and emotional health.

Printed and bound in the United States of America.

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Susan's Story

This brief story is a combination of several women's experiences. I'm sharing it with you as an example of some of the reactions you may be experiencing All of Susan's reactions and responses are completely normal following the death of a parent.

Susan considered her family and childhood to be fairly normal. She had grown up with her parents, an older brother, and a younger brother. Susan's mother had initially stayed home to be with Susan and her brothers, but quickly returned to work when they started school. Her father's job kept him on the road frequently, but he was able to regularly volunteer with Susan's 4-H Club. Her relationship with her parents wasn't always perfect — Susan's parents didn't like it when she got engaged at age 19, but they eventually agreed that Susan had made a good choice. She had always loved her parents, but there were times when she could feel the difference between their generations and their views on life.

Susan lived in the same town as her parents. After getting married she had two children of her own. There were many benefits to having her parents nearby, but sometimes it felt like they never recognized her as an adult. This changed when her father was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. Although her mother was the primary caregiver, Susan soon found herself stopping by daily to make sure they were both safe and healthy. Eventually the time came when Susan and her brothers had to tell their mother to either get professional assistance or to move their father into an Alzheimer's facility. As the child who lived closest to her parents, Susan felt guilty that she didn't have enough time to take care of her own children, work, and also care for her parents.

Susan wasn't too surprised to get a call from her mother with the news of her father's death. But she was shocked when she got a call the next day from the home health aide telling her that her mother had died from a stroke. Susan had a variety of reactions after hearing about her parents' deaths. On one hand, she was relieved her father was free from the grip of Alzheimer's. It had been terrible to see him quickly lose his most precious memories; in the last few months he hadn't even recognized Susan when she would visit. She was also relieved her mother would no longer have to worry about taking care of her father. Her mother had worked so hard to care for her father and she had felt very guilty after moving him into an Alzheimer's facility.

In addition to her relief, Susan found herself being frustrated at



her mother for not taking her children's advice and moving their father into a facility sooner. She worried that the stress of trying to live in her own home and take care of her husband had caused her mother to die prematurely. She was upset that her father had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and that it had robbed her parents of enjoying their golden years. She even felt angry with her father for having the disease, even though she knew her anger was misplaced and unfounded.

Most of all, Susan felt sadness. She was sad her parents would not see their grandchildren graduate. She was sad she wouldn't be able to have a late night conversation with her father on the back porch and wouldn't eat another one of her mother's homemade cinnamon rolls. Susan and her siblings decided to have a visitation and a joint funeral service for their parents. Susan was initially dreading these events. However, she learned so many new things about her parents. It was especially important to hear from people who had known her parents when they were young. Susan's parents hadn't often told stories of their childhood years, and Susan found herself laughing at stories of her mother being mischievous in school and her father at his first job. It was heartwarming to hear how they had been an important part of so many peoples' lives. After the visitation, Susan and her brothers gathered at their parents' house and continued to tell stories of their childhood and their mother and father. Many of the stories hadn't been told in years and it was fun to have each sibling fill in the forgotten details.

Sitting in the funeral the next day made everything feel so final. Susan and her siblings took specific steps to personalize the funeral. Susan handcrafted two special flower arrangements. She placed a bouquet of white roses, the same style of bouquet her mother carried at her wedding, on each of the caskets. Susan's younger brother read their parents' vows from their wedding, and almost everyone had a good cry. In many ways, it felt natural that her parents would share a funeral after being married for 54 years.

After the funeral, Susan faced many new challenges and adjustments. As the only child who lived in their hometown, Susan had to take care of numerous legal and financial details — everything from donating her parents' clothes to selling her parents' house. Susan had to find time for these duties even as she cared for her own family and continued to work. Throughout the first several months she often found herself distracted and daydreaming.

Some of the biggest challenges Susan faced were the day to day experiences when she was reminded that her parents had died, like when she noticed the roses blooming at her parents' house — even though they no longer lived there. She started crying as she was walking through an antique store and saw a crystal angel figurine — it was a rare piece that her mother had searched for years to

find. "I must be losing it," she thought to herself as she rushed out of the antique store.

Susan discovered there were consistent times when she missed her parents. She often thought about them in the evening right after dinner. She had always called them to see if they needed anything. Although it had felt like a burden at the time, she wished she could still call them and hear their voices.

About three months after the funeral Susan found that she was still thinking about her parents daily. Sometimes she wondered if she should be "getting over" her parents' deaths by now and if she was doing something wrong.

To see how Susan deals with these adjustments and her grief, read the Epilogue.



Common Grief Reactions

People have a wide variety of reactions to the death of a parent. Furthermore, your reactions will likely vary over the weeks, months, and years to come. Here are several common grief reactions:

- Sadness & Crying
- Guilt & Self Blame
- Helplessness & Shock
- Loneliness & Yearning
- Anger & Irritability
- Fatigue & Lack of Energy

- Insomnia & Restlessness
- Forgetful & Absentminded
- Lack of appetite
- Dreams about the deceased
- Regret
- Relief

Normal Grief Reactions following the Death of a Parent

Shock: Other than sadness, shock is one of the most common reactions following the death of a loved one. Many adults go through a period of shock after learning a parent has died; others may have been anticipating the death due to their parent's illness. This shock may last a few hours or several weeks, and it is a normal reaction unless it lasts more than several weeks. The shock may be less if you have already experienced the death of a parent — but various factors can influence this reaction. Many people don't cry when they are in this state of shock. Let me assure you that not crying in the days and weeks following your loss does not mean that you don't love your mother or father. Do not belittle or ridicule yourself if you have been unable to cry. It is common for adult women to feel like they need to immediately take care of family members and various responsibilities; you may not have had time to fully experience the loss of your parent.

Disbelief: Because your parent has always been an integral part of your life, it will take your mind some time to fully understand this loss. Most adults will experience some "disbelief" reactions that are a normal part of the early grief process. These moments of disbelief typically occur in small ways. For example, you may hear your phone ring and momentarily think, "That's my mother calling" before remembering she is gone. Or you may begin to think about holiday plans only to realize that your father won't be around this year. These are normal reactions to the death of a loved one, and they may happen for many months.

Avoidance: You may find that you want to avoid thinking about your parent after their death. This is also normal. It is unhealthy and unhelpful to either constantly think about your parent or to always avoid thinking about them. It is normal and healthy to take breaks from your grief. You deserve to have time to focus on your-

self, your other loved ones, and the practical challenges that you now face. It does not mean you love your parent less, and it does not mean you are grieving incorrectly.

Guilt: Guilt is also a frequent reaction following the death of a parent. Adult children may ask themselves questions such as "What if ...?" "If I had only ..." and "Why didn't I ...?" These questions are very common and normal. There was likely nothing you could have done to prevent your parent's death.

A common source of guilt is when adult children had to make medical decisions for their parents. These types of decisions are some of the most difficult that an adult will ever face. It is common to second-guess yourself, and it is natural to wonder if you made the correct decisions. I have never met anyone who made these decisions without careful consideration. I am sure you thoughtfully examined all the options and made the best decision possible with the information that was available.

Anger: Grief may be expressed as anger. Sometimes it is easier to be angry than sad. When a loved one dies, we'd often like to think there is someone who should be at fault. This may be especially true when the death is sudden, unexpected, and involves an accident or intentional harm. Of course in some cases, like a negligent surgeon or a drunk driver, your anger will be completely justified.

But perhaps the most important questions are: What is the anger doing for you? What purpose is it serving? Anger can be helpful. It may drive you to make changes like starting a charity in your parent's name or getting a law changed. But anger can only help at the beginning of these changes. It cannot be used to maintain these causes because anger is too destructive to the survivor if it is maintained over a long time. Anger can only be healing if it has been transformed into a desire to help others; eventually charity, grace, and altruism must replace anger as the primary motivators.

Some bereaved people are afraid to give up their guilt and anger. They mistakenly assume that if they are no longer experiencing guilt or anger they will begin to forget or dishonor their parent. This simply isn't true. You can continue to honor and remember your parent without the self-destructive effects of long-term guilt and anger. After all, if your father or mother could talk to you, would they want you to live the rest of your life consumed with guilt and anger?

Relief: There are two common situations when you may feel relief following the death of a parent: when you were a caregiver for your parent or when the relationship was troubled. It is common for the bulk of caregiving for elderly parents to fall to adult daughters. You may have been caregiving for your parent for weeks, months, or years. In these situations it is normal to experience relief — both that your parent is no longer suffering and that you are no longer required to perform caregiving tasks. Many women experience guilt in association with this relief. They convince themselves they are being selfish for being released from their caregiving role and believe they should not experience any sense of relief. As mentioned in the section on guilt and anger, try to recognize that your parent would not want you to be consumed with guilt. After all, your parent has been released from their pain and illness and you should be released from your caregiving duties. This does not mean you don't love your parent or honor your relationship.

The other situation where you may feel relief is when your relationship with your mother or father was troubled and conflicted. Although we are taught not to speak ill of the deceased, the reality of the situation may be that your parent had numerous faults. Perhaps your relationship had been troubled for years or decades. You may have loved your parent, but not liked some of their behaviors. To make things more difficult, others may not have known about your parent's faults, and they may speak of them as being more admirable than they really were. In these situations, it can be incredibly helpful to find a trusted person or professional you can confide in. Some adult children find support among their siblings because they have often experienced the same challenges.

Should I Get Professional Help?

First, you should always seek professional assistance if you think it would be helpful to you. You certainly don't have to be "crazy" or mentally ill to benefit from grief counseling or a support group. Mental health professionals can provide an unbiased perspective and can help you develop strategies for becoming "unstuck" in your grief. Grief counseling is not a magic potion or a cure for your grief; you won't walk out of your sessions feeling as though your grief has disappeared. But professional assistance can help you better understand your grief and can provide a safe environment for talking about your concerns.



Signs You May Need Professional Help

- You feel that you are "stuck" in your grief in some way
- Your grief has not lessened (or has gotten worse) after several months or a year
- Your feelings of guilt and/or anger have not diminished
- You can't say your parent's name or you won't allow others to talk about them
- You experience grief, depression, and/or anxiety that impairs your ability to take care of yourself, be effective in your work, or maintain your relationships with others
- You experience thoughts of self-harm or suicide (Always seek help in these situations)
- Your use of alcohol, medications, or illegal substances impairs your ability to be a fully-functioning person

^{*}All of these signs (with the exceptions of thoughts of self-harm or substance abuse) refer to your situation several months after the loss — not immediately after your parent's death

Common Questions About Grief

What About the Stages of Grief?

The most widely known theory of grief is Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's Stages of Grief. Many people assume that her stages (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) are the "right" way to grieve, but this is incorrect. Research and professional experience support the view that grief reactions are very individualized—they do not follow one pattern. So don't be worried if you don't feel angry or if you don't experience denial. Each person's process of grief is unique, and you shouldn't try to match your reactions to any specific stage of grief.

How Long Should Grief Last?

Many people expect grief to be something you "get over" in a matter of weeks. In fact, your grief may last a year or more and many feel grief even longer than that. Most adults find their grief eventually lessens, but also feel that a part of them is always grieving the loss of their parent.

Although most adults report feeling better several months to several years after their loss, this does not mean that grief necessarily follows a pattern of improving each day. Many people find that grief may peak a few months following a parent's death. One possible reason for this is bereaved adults are often well-supported during the first few weeks after their parent's death, but the support quickly declines. As you continue to grieve, some well-meaning friends and family members may suggest that your grief should be over. This is unrealistic. Except in extreme cases, you should follow your own grieving timeline.

Furthermore, most bereaved adults have "grief bursts" — moments or days when their grief is especially painful. These bursts of grief may be due to significant days (e.g., parent's birthday, parent's anniversary, holidays, child's birthday, mother's/father's day, etc.) or random reminders of your parent. These "bad days" can also be

a result of a new realization or a new "first." For example, you may have a grief burst on the day you send out the graduation announcements for your child and realize your parent won't be there. These reminders may even seem silly to you and others — perhaps the roses in your mother's garden finally bloomed and you're upset that she didn't get to witness it or your father's favorite sports team finally won the championship that he had waited years to see. Grief bursts are a normal, although painful, part of grief. Most importantly, experiencing them does not mean that you are regressing or that you are not grieving correctly.

How Do I Achieve Closure or Resolution?

One of the most common questions I get is "How do I get



closure?" I have to admit, I don't like the term "closure." I worry that people who think they should have closure after the death of a parent assume the goal of grief is to never again feel sadness or pain about

their loss. For most people, this isn't a realistic goal. While the vast majority of adults find they are doing well within a year or two after their parent's death, they also report feeling some grief at times. A more reasonable goal is to get to the point where you are not feeling intense pain every time you think about your parent.

Grief doesn't get wrapped up. It changes, it evolves, but important losses are life-changing events. We don't ask newlyweds how quickly they get back to the way they were before getting married; we don't expect new parents to get back to the way things were before they had their first child. Why do we assume we will "get back to" life as it was before the death of a parent? Life will never be like

it was before — no matter how much time elapses. Hopefully the loss won't be as intense as it first was, but it is important to accept that life will always be different.

Is There a "Right" Way to Grieve? HEART GRIEVERS & HEAD GRIEVERS

There are lots of assumptions about the "best" way to grieve. For many years, most people (including psychologists) assumed the only way to grieve was to express feelings of loss through crying and talking. More recently, grief experts have begun to rethink this assumption. In fact, many individuals adapt well by using other methods.

I believe (and recent research supports) there is no one correct way to grieve. There are some common responses, but grief is highly personal and unique. One view of grief that I support is the idea that there are two general styles of grieving: "heart grievers" and "head grievers." Both ways of expressing grief can be normal and healthy. Heart grievers find comfort in sharing their feelings with others, experience grief very intensely, and express their loss through tears. Most women (but not all) tend to be heart grievers. Conversely, head grievers express their grief through their thoughts and actions, are uneasy crying in front of others, and often focus on solving the problems associated with their loss¹. For example, head grievers may express their grief through taking an active role in planning the funeral, channeling their grief into physical exercise, spending time alone thinking about their loved one, and choosing specific times when they feel comfortable expressing their feelings. Not surprisingly, men are more likely to be head grievers, but some women also identify with this style. I should note that few people fall completely into one category or the other, and some people will feel comfortable with both styles (heart and head).

¹ The concepts of heart and head grievers are based on Ken Doka and Terry Martin's concepts of instrumental and intuitive grief styles. See their book, Grieving Beyond Gender, for more information.

Therefore, the best way to grieve is to follow your own natural style.

Do I Have to Forget My Parent?

There is a longstanding grief myth that it is necessary to eventually "let go" or forget the deceased. We now know that this is not a healthy and adaptive way to grieve. Instead, it is healthy and normal to maintain some "continuing bonds" with your parent after their death². These bonds may include thinking about them, talking to them and about them, visiting a gravesite or special place, and other ways of feeling connected to them. I believe these different ways of honoring and remembering your parent can be an important part of the grief process, as long as you balance them with continuing to love those who are still living.

² For more on this see the book Continuing Bonds by Klass, Silverman, and Nickman.



Helping Yourself: Practical Strategies

Be Gentle with Yourself

Give yourself at least as much patience and grace as you would give to a friend or loved one who had suffered the loss of a loved one. We are often much kinder to others than we are with ourselves.

Be Open to Opportunities

Many grieving people are hesitant to socialize with others. I would encourage you to accept offers to socialize and be active with others, if you feel like doing so.

Take Care of Yourself

Be sure to eat healthy, exercise, and take care of your physical health. It is common to feel a strange combination of exhaustion and nervous energy, yet also have difficulty falling and staying asleep. Eating well and exercise can help drain some of this restlessness and may help you sleep better.



Express Yourself

It can be helpful to express yourself through creative hobbies or activities. Some examples include sewing, quilting, woodworking, painting, writing poetry, singing, writing stories, or playing an instrument.

Share your Thoughts and Feelings

Setting aside time and space when you feel comfortable talking with others can be incredibly helpful. This may involve talking with a trusted friend or family member, a clergy person, or a therapist. You may want someone to simply listen or to help you solve problems. The nature of these conversations may be different if you are a heart or head griever (see Common Questions about Grief section), but regardless of your grieving style, it can be helpful to gain another person's perspective and support.

Read Books about Other People's Responses to Parent Loss

The death of a parent can be challenging. You may not know many other individuals who have experienced the death of a parent, or you may not feel comfortable talking with others. It can be helpful to read about how other grieving people have dealt with the death of a parent. Books can help you feel less lonely and can provide guidance about how to adjust to life without your parent. I have reviewed numerous books about grieving a parent on my website: www.GriefPlan.com.

Engage in Meaningful Rituals and Activities

Many grieving people find it helpful to create meaningful habits and activities. These actions can be large or small, public or private, and symbolize your relationship with your parent. For example, you may find comfort in going to the cemetery to visit their gravesite. You might decide to donate money in your parent's name to their favorite charity or organization. More examples of these types of activities are listed in the next section.



Honoring & Remembering Your Parent

There are many different ways to honor and remember your parent. The best ways are those that are meaningful to you and your loved ones. Think about what was important to your parent. What organizations and activities were they committed to? How can you help others remember their contributions and legacy? But most importantly, what would be helpful for you as you grieve your parent? Below are some ideas to help you begin thinking creatively about ways to honor and remember your parent.

Ways to Honor and Remember your Parent

1) Create a photo album, scrapbook, memory book, video montage, or other visual way to remember your parent.

Creating a visual reminder of your parent can be a wonderful way to honor them. Many people find great comfort in reviewing pictures of their parent as a way to remember the happy and important moments of life.

2) Volunteer for or contribute to an organization whose mission you support.

Many grieving people find it necessary to do something active as part of their grief response. They feel the need to "do something." Volunteering at an organization that was meaningful to your parent or donating money to a cause they cared about can be a way to honor their legacy.

3) Keep a special reminder with you.

You may feel extremely lonely after your parent dies — this is a natural reaction. It may help you to carry something that reminds you of your parent. For example, you might carry a picture of your parent, a significant piece of jewelry (e.g., wedding ring, a special watch, etc.), or something else of significance as a way to continue to feel close to them. Let me assure you that there is nothing pathological or unhealthy about doing this.

4) Ongoing Rituals and Moments of Significance.

There are many ways that you can continue to feel connected to your parent. Examples of daily, weekly, or monthly rituals include saying "good morning" to your parent's picture as you get ready for the day, including them in your daily prayers, visiting their gravesite or other important location on a regular basis, and many other possibilities. Just as your relationship with your parent was built upon many daily interactions, so too can your connection be maintained with small, but significant moments of remembrance.

Epilogue: Susan's Story

This is a continuation of Susan's story from the beginning of the booklet. At the end I discuss how all of Susan's reactions are normal responses to her parents' deaths.

Over the next several months Susan continued to deal with various aspects of her parents' deaths. She wanted to take some specific actions and find support to help deal with her grief. Susan worried that she would forget all the wonderful things about her parents. She decided to put together a scrapbook that included pictures and memories of her mother and father. Susan also wanted to talk about her grief. Although she was initially hesitant, Susan's friend convinced her to try a local support group for bereaved adults. Susan found it was helpful to talk and listen to others whose parents had died. She quickly realized that no one in the group was "crazy," but it was filled with normal people who were also dealing with the death of a loved one. Susan discovered many of the group members also experienced the same reactions including sadness, guilt, frustration, and relief. It helped her feel normal to hear that others shared the same concerns.

Susan found specific ways to remember her mother. She went back to the antique store and bought the crystal angel. She immediately drove to the cemetery and took the angel to her mother's gravesite. Susan told her mother that she had finally found the angel they had always been looking for and that it would always have a place of honor on Susan's fireplace mantel. Over the next few months, Susan found herself looking at the angel every time she walked through the room, and it reminded her of the fun times she and her mother had spent shopping in antique stores together.

Susan also wanted to do something that would honor her father. She decided to volunteer with the local 4-H club – just like her father had done for her. She even got one of her own children to join and found it was a great way to connect with both her child and her father.

Susan found herself especially missing her parents as Christmas approached. She and her siblings' families had always had a Christmas Eve dinner at her parents' house. She was thrilled that her older brother decided to invite everyone to his house for Christmas. They specifically made some of their parents' favorite dishes and shared old Christmas memories. Thankfully, there was more laughter than tears as they talked about Christmases growing up.

After several months Susan realized she had reached the point where she could think about her parents with more joy than pain. She knew her parents' legacy would always be a part of her and she could consider the future with renewed hope.



Susan's Story: Dr. Troyer's Commentary

All of Susan's reactions to her parents' deaths were normal responses. I'll comment on several specific reactions:

- It is normal to be in a state of shock and disbelief after hearing about a loved one's death. This doesn't mean you didn't love them; it is simply your mind's way of helping you adjust to the news.
- Most people have difficulty concentrating or focusing after the death of a loved one. It can be difficult to sustain a train of thought or follow conversations.
- It is normal to feel a wide range of emotions and reactions during grief — including laughter. Don't feel guilty if you laugh while you are grieving. Telling humorous stories about the deceased can be a great way to honor them and take a break from intense sadness.
- Although no one looks forward to a funeral or a visitation, many people find that these events can be an opportunity to learn about their loved one from others, express their sadness, and share the legacy of the deceased.
- Like Susan when she began crying in the antique store, all bereaved people will experience random moments when they feel the pain of their loss. These moments are often impossible to predict, but they are a normal part of grief.
- In addition to feeling sadness, Susan was angry that her father had developed Alzheimer's Disease. Whatever the reason, it is common to be frustrated or even angry with the deceased. Most grieving people don't think they can talk about their frustration for fear they will be viewed as uncaring. It can help to talk with a trusted person who won't judge your anger.

- Attending a support group is not a sign of weakness. It is simply
 a way to receive and express support following a loss and does
 not mean that you are "crazy."
- Many adults whose parents die find there are specific occasions or holidays when they especially miss them. It is helpful to anticipate these events, openly recognize their absence, and talk freely about how much you miss them. Often people discover they can still find joy in the occasion after acknowledging their loss.
- There are many things you can do to honor your parent's memory. Susan decided to create a scrapbook and volunteer with an organization that she identified with her father. For other examples see "Ways to Honor and Remember your Parent."



A Final Word of Hope

While no words can take away your grief, I hope this booklet has provided you with information and comfort. I want to remind you that grief takes many different forms and it may resurface at seemingly random times. In addition to these moments of pain, you will eventually have unexpected pleasant memories. For example, you may smile whenever you drive by a specific park because it reminds you of picnics with your parent. For most people the ache of grief does lessen over time.

My hope is that you are surrounded by supportive loved ones as you grieve the death of your parent and that eventually your happy memories endure longer than the sad ones.

With sincerest condolences,

JASON TROYER, PHD www.GriefPlan.com



About the Author

Dr. Jason Troyer is the creator of GriefPlan.com. In his professional



experience as a therapist, grief researcher, and professor, he discovered that grieving people wanted a plan to help them on their grief journey. His GriefPlan Programs include videos, information, activities, writing prompts, and other tools to guide people to heal, remember, and rebuild after loss. Dr. Troyer also offers 1-on-1 GriefPlan Coaching for those who want additional help. He provides engaging presentations and workshops on a

variety of grief-related topics. Dr. Troyer earned his doctorate in Counseling Psychology and masters in Counseling. You can contact Dr. Troyer at GriefPlan.com.



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