

How does losing a parent shape a child's future?

When a child loses a parent, he/she/they can experience a feeling of emptiness or like something is missing; a deep longing for their deceased parent; a need to share their story accompanied by the fear that no one will understand; and recurring or unresolved grief, sometimes associated with guilt. These feelings can influence how quickly they mature and can continue into adulthood.

Brene Brown, PhD, MSW, is a shame, empathy, and vulnerability researcher. In her book, [Atlas of the Heart](#), she describes “three foundational elements of grief ... as loss, longing and feeling lost.” She defines loss as “loss of normality, the loss of what could be and the loss of what we thought we knew or understood about something or someone.” She says, “longing is not conscious wanting; it’s an involuntary yearning for wholeness, for understanding, for the opportunity to regain or even simply touch what we’ve lost... Grief requires us to reorient every part of our physical, emotional, and social worlds... The more difficult it is for us to articulate or experiences of loss, longing, and feeling lost to the people around us, the more disconnected and alone we feel.” For children, it can be the case that they simply do not have the language or vocabulary to express what they are going through.

Dr. Brown quotes The Center for Complicated Grief at Columbia in her chapter entitled, Where we go when we’re hurting: “When a person adapts to a loss, grief is not over... It doesn’t mean we’re sad for the rest of our lives, it means that ‘grief finds a place’ in our lives.” There is forever a before and after a loss and we are never quite the same.

Furthermore, Dr. Brown quotes David Kessler, “what everyone has in common is that no matter how they grieve, they share a need for their grief to be witnessed.” Similarly, she refers to Professor Neimeyer as he states, “most people who struggle with complicating loss, feel a great press to ‘tell the story,’ to find someone willing to hear what others cannot, and who can join them in making sense of the death without withdrawing into awkward silence or offering trite and superficial advice regarding the question it poses.” This need to be seen and understood in the wake of a parent’s death can be dismissed or not fully taken into account because children are thought to be resilient and to adapt more easily. However, children grieve in much the same way that adults do.

The feeling of missing the deceased parent is common for children, even into adulthood. In the case of Liz Zorn, in “What no one tells you about losing a parent,” speaks about wishing time could stop and how, “life is different forever” after losing her dad from cancer. Nothing is ever the same; it can feel like a hole or like something is missing. In Nora McInerney’s podcast, *Terrible, Thanks for Asking*, she interviews Chelsea in an episode entitled, “The Missing Puzzle Piece.” Chelsea’s mom died in a car accident on Chelsea’s first birthday. Even with no real memories of her mom, Chelsea says she “had nights I cried myself to sleep; I wanted her so badly” and that she felt as if she had a “hole in my heart that could never be filled.”

Longing for the deceased can be exacerbated for children if they do not feel heard or they are not allowed to express themselves. Liz Zorn expresses this thought by saying the “there is some permanency around death. The rest of your life seems a lot longer – a long time to be without a parent.” She longs for her dad and to remember him; she fears “forgetting his laugh, smile and his voice.” Longing to see him again encouraged the belief that she will; “Heaven was just a word until my dad died.” In the video, *Losing a Parent at a Young Age*, the speaker talks about an “ache and longing for the mother she lost.” Chelsea, from “The Missing Puzzle Piece” podcast really struggled connecting to her stepmother, as there was a “constant pull” between the stepmom and birth mom. Chelsea asked her father for information, as well as, other family members and a teacher, who happened to be at

the scene of her mother's accident. She was relieved and comforted when her dad shared journals on her 20th birthday that, he, family, and friends had written in with their memories of her mom.

Each of these young women felt the need to share their stories, even though they were not certain others would understand. Family, friends and, sometimes people they never met before, reached out to share memories of their deceased loved ones. Sometimes, friends do not get in touch or say anything and that can lead to feelings of being all alone or disconnected. In "Losing a Parent at a Young Age," the speaker says she "didn't know anyone else going through what she was." No one really spoke to her at the time, and she did not think anyone else would understand. People can continue to search for many years for answers, for connections and will seek out others who will listen and acknowledge their loss.

Children who do not fully understand or who are not allowed to express themselves can sometimes deal with recurring or unresolved/complicated grief, and even guilt, throughout their lifetime. Liz Zorn said, "Holidays and birthdays can be hard, but normal days are hard, too;" things you remember or think of just "hit you all of a sudden and life reminds you that you're still grieving." The author of "Losing a Parent at a Young Age," lost her mom when she was twelve. She always, "thinks about what she could have done differently" and she "replays the day." She feels guilty and blames herself because she went on a field trip the day her mom died.

Andrew Huberman, a professor of Neurobiology and Ophthalmology at Stanford School of Medicine, leads a podcast called the Huberman Lab. In his episode entitled, "Healing from Grief," Dr. Huberman states that grief can be "bewildering because somehow, despite our best efforts we are unable to reframe and shift our mind to the idea that the person that at one point was here, and so very present, is now gone." He shares Mary Francis O'Connor's premise that we neurologically, "map our experiences of people in three dimensions: space, time and closeness or emotional connection." When children, or even adults, lose someone close to them, "it's often the case that our entire relationship to life feels different." Grief is "indeed a state of yearning and desire of something that is just outside your reach and unfortunately, will always, be just outside your reach until you remap your relationship to that person." "Grief is the process of uncoupling, unbraiding, and untangling that relationship between where people are in space, in time and our relationship to them."

For some children who have lost a parent, this process can be difficult leaving them longing for their deceased parent, feeling disconnected from others and yet, having a strong desire to tell their stories and be heard and validated as is the case for Liz, Life with a Cup of Joe author and Chelsea.

References:

What no one tells you about losing a parent, Liz Zorn

Losing a Parent at a Young Age, Life with a Cup of Joe

Huberman Lab Podcast, Dr Andrew Huberman, Healing from Grief

Terrible, Thanks for Asking, Nora McInerny, The Missing Puzzle Piece

Brene Brown, [Atlas of the Heart](#)