

How to Mend Unresolved or Difficult Parental-Child Relationships After the Loss of a Parent

After the loss of a parent, oftentimes the relationship between adult children and the deceased or surviving parent can be strained, unresolved or difficult.

This month, I asked a well-known grief expert, Russell Friedman, Executive Director of the Grief Recovery Institute** (where I was also trained as a Grief Recovery Specialist) and co-author of *The Grief Recovery Handbook* as well as the book *When Children Grieve* to answer a few questions about dealing with grief and loss as it relates to resolving difficult parent-child relationships. (**Note: The Grief Recovery Institute describes itself as “an internationally recognized authority, provides programs for The Compassionate Friends, The National SIDS Foundation, The National AIDS Network, The University of California at Irvine, Chapman University, and many others”.)

1. Russell, when adults lose a parent, sometimes their relationship with that deceased parent has unresolved issues. How do you recommend adults deal with these unresolved feelings and find closure?

RF: Rather than sometimes, it’s almost inevitable that when one of our parents dies we will have some “unfinished emotional business,” which could also be called unresolved grief. In simple terms, there are always things we wish had been *different, better, or more*; and there are always *unrealized hopes, dreams, and expectations* about the future. The unfinished things that accrue in those highlighted categories are not necessarily caused by problems or difficulties in the relationship [although sometimes they are], but are the natural by-products of the complexities of our most important relationships. We recommend that people use the actions of Grief Recovery to discover and complete what remains emotionally incomplete for them.

2. After the loss of a parent, an adult child can find themselves left to care for the parent they had a difficult relationship with prior to the loss of their other parent. How do you suggest adults manage the grief and loss of a parent they mourn along with managing the difficult parent relationship that remains?

RF: Once again, the key is to discover and complete what was left emotionally incomplete in the relationship with the parent who died – even if it was essentially a good relationship. It is important to work on that relationship first because the death of that parent is first and foremost on the griever’s heart and mind. Then, we strongly suggest that the griever use the actions of Grief Recovery to discover and complete what is emotionally incomplete in the difficult relationship with the living parent. Dealing with the resentments and other emotions in that relationship will make it possible to become a helpful and positive caregiver.

3. How does someone recover from grief? Or when does someone know when it is time to begin to recover? Is there a typical time frame? Are there specific steps to take?

RF: Recovery from grief or loss is achieved by a series of small and correct actions. As indicated above, those actions help the griever discover and then complete our relationship to those things

we wish had been *different, better, or more*; and to the *unrealized hopes, dreams, and expectations* we had about the future.

The answer to the question When is it time to begin to recover? is addressed in The Grief Recovery Handbook with this two part question: A.] If you fell down and gashed your leg and blood was pouring out, would you immediately seek medical attention, yes or no? The obvious answer is yes. B.] If circumstances and events conspired to break your heart, should you seek attention immediately, or would you allow yourself to bleed to death emotionally? Pick one! Is it ever too soon to begin to recover? NO.

4. How is the loss of parent for an adult different than other losses?

RF: Every relationship that has ever happened between people is unique, there are no exceptions. Since we never compare losses, we would never suggest that a parent/child relationship could or should ever be compared to any other relationship. Needless to say, relationships between parents and children often have degrees of difficulty that less intense relationships don't have, but they remain unique and must be completed as unique and not as a stereotypical relationship.

5. What is the best thing an adult child can do for their newly widowed parent with regard to grief and loss?

RF: Nothing! Yes, I know that sounds mean-spirited, but the assumption that one can "do something" for someone else is incorrect and even dangerous. It also presumes that the new widow has asked for help. That said, what the adult child can do that will most benefit the surviving parent, is to be honest about their own feelings of grief and loss relative to the unique relationship he or she had with the parent who died. That would set an example that the surviving parent might be encouraged to follow. Interestingly enough, that is the same guidance we would give to a parent of a young child – in effect to model or demonstrate what is true for the parent so the child can copy it.

6. When young children lose a parent or grandparent, what is most critical for their surviving family or friends to provide for them?

RF: The answer to this question is essentially the same as the second part of the question above. There are other elements that relate to the Six Myths about grief that limit our ability to deal effectively with loss. The myths are: Don't feel Bad; Replace the Loss; Grieve Alone; Time Heals all Wounds; Be Strong and Be Strong for Others; and Keep Busy. It is essential that adults not pass on those myths to children. Details about those myths are in our books, *The Grief Recovery Handbook & When Children Grieve*.

7. When an adult loses a parent, what is the smartest thing he or she can do for himself or herself?

RF: Begin taking the actions of Grief Recovery as soon as possible. That might seem like add advice but there's a very important reason why it is true. In the days and weeks immediately following the death of someone important to us, our minds and hearts are almost totally focused on our memories of our relationship with the person who died. In the beginning, those memories

tend to be accurate – as well as provoking a great deal of emotion. As time passes, memory fades and alters, making it more difficult to do effective Grief Recovery.

8. What is the biggest mistake people make after the loss of a parent?

RF: There are many different mistakes, so it's difficult to say which is the biggest. One of the more limiting ones is to intellectualize the loss in terms of things we hear and even say to ourselves, things like: Don't Feel Bad – He/She is in a better place; or, Don't Feel Bad – He/She Lived a Long Full Life. The fact is that when someone important to us dies, it is normal and natural to feel sad or bad. It is also normal and healthy to talk about the relationship we had with the person who died, with all the feelings that accompany those memories – good, bad, and sometimes ugly.

Thank you, Russell. This is very valuable and helpful information for all of us to use and pass along to others.

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