

CHAPTER ONE

FIRST WEEKS AFTER LOSS



The first days and weeks following the death of a loved one are difficult for many reasons. First is the huge shock of loss and onset of the grieving process, which is experienced differently among family members. Then, to add to the emotional onslaught, many important and difficult decisions must be made quickly and definitively by those who are reeling from the impact of the loss of one they dearly loved. The suggestions that follow will help you and your surviving parent navigate the difficult and emotional first weeks following the loss of your mom or dad.

DO ONLY ESSENTIAL TASKS

I can't imagine how you feel after the loss of your parent. You may be in shock, sad, relieved, or plain exhausted—depending on how the death happened. When a parent's death takes place, no matter if the death was unexpected or not, new roles, responsibilities, choices, and changes fall into the widow or widower's, and other family members' laps. Especially when an unexpected death of a parent occurs, many families aren't prepared to deal with the many consequences.

Your widowed parent may turn to you to figure out immediate solutions to pressing problems, including finding wills, organizing a funeral and memorial service, and writing obituaries and eulogies. Other family members may stick to the sidelines not knowing how to help. Meanwhile, your own life, jam-packed with activities and responsibilities, screams for your attention. Torn between two worlds you care about, you try to juggle both. You think you have no choice. Actually, you do.

One Solution for the First Weeks after the Loss of a Parent

After the loss of a parent, people want to contribute and can do a good—if not better—job than you can. No one judges your performance at your time of grief. Life's pace bounces hectically around you, but if you need to bow out of the spotlight temporarily, it's okay. Do what you can, but access resources and solicit support from others to assist with the funeral and memorial service planning. Friends, extended family members, clergy or other religious leaders, funeral directors, and even professional organizers can offer assistance. Friends and family members want to donate their time and energy; tell them how.



Our Story

When my sister, mother, and I walked back into my parents' home after losing Dad to cancer, the exhaustion and stress of those last eleven months piled high on our shoulders. Our grief coursed through our veins. The idea of turning to friends to plan the funeral and memorial service seemed selfish. My mother, my sister, Ivy, and I all went into robotic organizer mode. We knocked out tasks methodically one at a time. When I wrote Dad's obituary, I hit my breaking point.

We all struggled with releasing control to others because everything seemed important to handle personally. The dark circles under our eyes darkened even more while we drank coffee practically nonstop and pushed on day after day. After my sister and I spent months away from our home in San Francisco, neglected work and bills called for our attention. After difficult nights of little to no sleep, we were all a mess. The workload was too much. Finally we sought help from other people, which provided solutions and reduced our tasks.

We took one task at a time and determined which duties were important for us personally to handle and which could be accomplished by others. Good friends made some of the necessary phone calls and coached us in making decisions about funeral and memorial service details. After we released some control and tasks to others we trusted, sleep came easier. We then had time to take care of ourselves by taking breaks or a walk, calling supportive friends, getting a manicure, or simply taking a nap.

We ignored our own needs when we tried to do everything ourselves. Your family may want you to take part in the planning, but you also need to take care of yourself. You may be captive to unexpected public meltdowns of emotion when

you take on too much. If you try to avoid the grief that comes along with the death of a mother or father, unresolved grief only delays your natural grieving process.

Grieving Your Own Way

Everyone grieves uniquely. Your distinctive circumstances create specific issues to sort out. You don't "get over" the death of a parent; you process and release grief at your own pace. You may ask, "How can I be okay with being selfish after the loss of a parent or spouse?" I'm not saying to be selfish, but don't forget about your own health and needs.



Resources for Grief

To find book, audio, and video products about grief and loss, go to the Web sites of **In-Sight Books** (p. 171), **Roberts Press** (p. 171), **Compassion Books** (p. 171), the **Grief ♥ Recovery Institute** (p. 177), or **Elizabeth Kübler-Ross** (p. 170 also p. 172). Other insightful and helpful books about grief include *This Thing Called Grief* (p. 169), *I Wasn't Ready to Say Good-bye* (p. 171), and the daily reader *Healing after Loss* (p. 170). If you find yourself thinking about your parent's death and his or her well-being after death, you might want to check out *Life after Death* (p. 172), *What They Saw . . . at the Hour of Death* (p. 172), or *Life after Life* (p. 172).



Resources for Time Off Work

You may not be able to afford to quit or jeopardize your job. If possible, though, try to reduce your job from full-time to part-time or at least take off as many days as possible without causing problems. If receiving time off work is an issue for you, contact your employer or your local **U.S. Department of Labor's Wage and Hour District Office** (p. 174) to see if you qualify for twelve weeks of legal leave from work through the **Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA)** (p. 174). Read the section Time Off from Work in chapter 3 for more information.



Resources for Eating Healthy after Loss

Food may be the last thing on anyone's mind, but when hunger strikes, available food brings comfort. Friends will ask how to support you. An easy answer is to ask them to make or order food to be delivered to your home. Friends who want to provide support with food needs can either cook meals for you or arrange a week

or two of fresh meal delivery for your family from companies such as **Gourmet Grocery Online** (p. 163), **Dinewise** (p. 163), **Home Bistro** (p. 164), or **Magic Kitchen** (p. 164). Food gift baskets from catalogues such as **Harry and David** (p. 164) also provide healthy eating options for grieving families.

Another option is to have friends arrange for personal chefs like **Big City Chefs** (p. 163) to come to your home to make food for your family. Organic food is another healthy food choice for friends or family members during times of grief. Arrange to have it delivered to the home from companies such as **Diamond Organics** (p. 163). Friends can also order takeout from local restaurants and have food delivered from a service such as **Takeout Taxi** (p. 164). Even small gifts of food from other people bring you and your family comfort and reduce stress.

If you live far away from your parent, friends can order groceries to be delivered to your parent's home. Online grocers who make home deliveries include **Peapod** (p. 173), **Netgrocer** (p. 173), and **Safeway** (p. 173). Let someone else exert energy picking out groceries and delivering them. You and your parent need to conserve all your energy and reduce the daily decisions you need to make.



Resources for Additional Funeral or Memorial Service Help

If you need additional funeral or memorial service assistance outside family members, friends, clergy or funeral directors, try contacting the **National Association of Professional Organizers** (p. 164) to find a professional organizer. Your local **Chamber of Commerce** (p. 164) may provide referrals of event planners to aid in organizing a memorial service. For more information on planning a funeral or memorial service, read the next section, Create an Energy Team. Check out Part III: Resources, under “First Weeks after Loss” for more grief, funeral, and memorial service resources.



Questions to Ask about Only Doing Essential Tasks

- * Why does my parent or I have to do everything?
- * What do I miss when I let a few things go?
- * What few comforting things can I do for myself if I have extra time? Speak with a grief counselor? Get a nurturing massage? Take a long walk?
- * What can I postpone until later?
- * What can I not do or what simply doesn't have to be done at all?

Go ahead and flex your muscles from time to time, but try to let friends and family take over when you need a break. Down the road, you will get a chance to flex your muscles for them. Life promises that fact.

*What do we live for, if not to make life
less difficult for each other?*

GEORGE ELLIOT



CREATE AN ENERGY TEAM

When you snow ski down a “black diamond” run for the first time, navigating the hill’s unexpected moguls and hazardous ice patches can be quite a challenge. A sudden blizzard can make it worse. Back at the top of the mountain, your skiing buddies offered encouragement and spiked your confidence. They promised to pay for a large hot cocoa and lunch if you arrived inside the lodge in ten minutes. Halfway down the run, your friends’ waves revive your motivation to keep going.

Sometimes we all need someone else to fill us with hope and encouragement when we are pushed to our limit. If you forge alone through the first weeks after the loss of a parent without an assembled support team, you might push yourself beyond what you can handle. When you’re alone, the work and grief loom large. With support, burdens shrink.

How to Remedy Low Energy

One solution is for you to create an “energy team” from the beginning. An energy team is a group of friends or family members taking on separate funeral or memorial service duties, which allows immediate family members to conserve