

Adult Orphans: Coping With the Loss of a Parent

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LISA CLARK: Welcome, and thank you for joining us for this webcast. I'm Lisa Clark.

As adults, we all comprehend the fact that someday our parents will die. But the reality of that event has much more emotional impact than we can often foresee. Even when our parents are advanced in age or have dealt with a long illness, it is hard to be prepared for the ramifications of such a loss, but they can be profound. For the next few minutes we'll take a look at the phenomenon of the adult orphan, and what the loss of your parent means, even when you are grown.

Joining us for this discussion is Benjamin Cirlin. Welcome. He is a clinical social worker and the executive director for the Center for Loss and Renewal in New York City. He's also the coordinator of bereavement services at Jacob Perlo Hospice of the Beth Israel Medical Center. Thanks for being here.

Also joining us is Patty Donovan-Duff. She is a registered nurse, and she is the director of the Bereavement Center of Westchester. Patty, you've also done a lot of hospice work. Benjamin, I want to go right to something that I know you're involved with. It is group work that deals specifically with these so-called adult orphans.

R. BENYAMIN CIRLIN, CSW: The fact is, parents are supposed to predecease children. Because it's a natural loss -- it follows the natural timeline -- many people sort of think that adults should just spend a few days grieving their parents and then get on with things, but there are lots and lots of adults who have a hard time moving on.

LISA CLARK: What are some of the typical feelings that this event awakes in person that they didn't realize was a part of their emotional structure?

R. BENYAMIN CIRLIN, CSW: Parents play a lot of roles for children, even when you're an adult. One of the roles that parents play is that they're sort of a buffer between ourselves and mortality. When a parent dies, often the adult child feels like they're on the front lines of mortality right now.

LISA CLARK: My mom has expressed that in almost exactly the same words. She lost her mother last year, and she said, "I feel like there's no one now between me and death." It's a very common feeling.

R. BENYAMIN CIRLIN, CSW: Another important phenomenon is that our parents are witnesses to our history. Many of us, when we grow up to be adults, don't have people who knew us when we were kids. When a parent dies, that witness to our childhood is gone, and it's now only something within us.

LISA CLARK: And the some people also, Patty, have to assume the role, say, of a caretaker, perhaps, of a surviving parent who is ill or perhaps even a younger sibling.

PATTY DONOVAN-DUFF, RN: Definitely-- roles change in assuming the caretaking of maybe an elderly parent where the parent who died had that role. I think, also, what happens is when you take someone out of a family as important as a parent, because very often the parent has been the buffer between siblings, the buffer between the other parent. How often have I heard, "I thought it would be the other parent who died first. I didn't think I'd have to be taking care of my father. I wish it was the other way sometimes." There are big changes in people's lives.

LISA CLARK: Benjamin, you talk about the adult orphan phenomenon as being a very real loss for people. Perhaps that makes their relationships with their other family -- with their spouse, with their children -- suffer. How do you help people deal with those feelings?

R. BENYAMIN CIRLIN, CSW: It's a very good point that you bring up. The truth is that not only in this case, say, the woman is suffering the loss, the husband and the kids have their own loss, namely, not only the loss of the grandmother or the grandfather, but also the loss of the mom as she was. So everybody's dealing with their own set of losses, primary losses and secondary losses.

LISA CLARK: But you also think that there is a lot to be learned and a lot of personal growth that can be achieved by processing these feelings and by assuming this new role in your life?

R. BENYAMIN CIRLIN, CSW: Absolutely. First of all, many people don't have good relationships with their parents. I've worked with a lot of people who have found their parents to be extreme critics, and they're always defending against that criticism. They've found when that critical person has died, there are feelings of sadness. They might have some feelings of ambivalence. But they also feel, "You know what? I can now go ahead with my life and do it without that criticism." There's a sense of relief. That's a feeling in grief that many people feel guilty about, relief.

LISA CLARK: Precisely, because you're not supposed to admit that sort of feeling. But it's a healthy, natural expression.

R. BENYAMIN CIRLIN, CSW: It's part of the grief picture.

LISA CLARK: I think people are becoming more comfortable with expressing grief, but there still is a tendency to either want to keep your pain private or to medicate. But you say that that's not a good idea.

PATTY DONOVAN-DUFF, RN: Unless people are not functioning, getting out of bed in the morning and not able to go to work when they have to go to work to support their family. The pain is a very important part of the grieving process. It is part of the healing process. That's why if you can have people around you while you're in that pain, supporting you -- that's the purpose of the support groups and the people who are bereavement counselors. I feel that we're just a support, we're there, people who listen and care and understand as people go down their grieving.

LISA CLARK: How useful are coping mechanisms like creating a ritual or having private conversations with someone who has died? Are those useful?

R. BENYAMIN CIRLIN, CSW: Absolutely. In spite of the fact that I work with talk therapy, I help people make artistic creation; finding ways to ritualize, to memorialize. A very important thing that people don't pay enough attention to is that grieving is not about forgetting. It's about finding a different place in your heart for the person.

LISA CLARK: That's a key consideration.

R. BENYAMIN CIRLIN, CSW: Right. The bond continues. It's about loving, not someone who's present, but someone who's absent.

LISA CLARK: I can't thank both of you enough. This has been a very illuminating conversation. As I've noted, it's a process that we will all have to go through at some point in our lives. I appreciate you being here, Benyamin and Patty. Thank you very much. Thank all of you for tuning in. I'm Lisa Clark.