

Grieving a parent's death ^[1]

Dear Alice,

My mother just died and I've just gone back to school. If this was on paper, you would see my teardrops covering it. I feel like I have no one to talk to. I see the school grief counselor once every three or four weeks, but I was wondering if there is anything else that I might be able to do to lessen my feelings of depression and the feeling that I've been abandoned.

Signed,
Lonely and Depressed

Answer

Dear Lonely and Depressed,

The feelings you're experiencing are a completely normal part of the grieving process. Grieving for a loved one, especially a parent, can be both physically and emotionally exhausting, not only because of the loss you've experienced, but because of the resulting changes in your family life. It's difficult and painful to feel abandoned — you may even feel angry, frustrated, hopeless, or guilty at times, and these feelings are also normal. Typically, grieving is most difficult early on, and it can take six months or more before you feel like you're starting to heal. But everyone grieves in their own way and at their own pace — so even if it takes longer or is more difficult than you expected, it's your unique process. In the meantime, there are many resources, whether it's through professionals, friends and family, or your school, that can be a source of support through this difficult time.

First off, kudos to you for not only recognizing that you may need additional help, but also for talking with a grief counselor. Keeping regular counseling appointments is a great start. If you don't feel like they're helping you manage your grief, you might try setting up more frequent appointments or working with your counselor to reevaluate your goals (i.e., re-focusing the attention of your sessions to managing your current feelings). If you find that you still aren't feeling better, even with more frequent visits to the grief counselor, you may consider talking with a mental health care provider. The death of a parent can be very stressful and may cause acute depression in addition to grief. A psychiatrist can help assess your specific situation and might be able to offer short-term solutions such as trying out a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor

(SSRI) medication. Or, if you prefer to talk with people other than your mental health care provider, consider joining a grief-related support group. It may be easier to process grief with a group of peers who have experienced similar losses and may more readily understand what you're going through.

During this time, it can also be helpful to seek out support from people you already feel close to — when you're ready. Often, friends and family are happy to help; however, they may not know how. If it doesn't feel like the people in your life are reaching out to you, it might be that they're waiting for you to approach them. Are there other relatives you can talk with who may be working through similar feelings of loss? How about talking to one of your mother's friends? If you're part of a church, temple, synagogue, or other religious community, you may turn to someone from that community for support. You can even ask someone to do something very specific: to listen to you, sit with you quietly, hug you, see a movie, or take a walk with you.

If you're not ready to reach out to others for support just yet, you can focus on taking care of yourself by keeping up with some healthy behaviors. Sometimes, staying active can make a difference: go for a run, hit the gym or the pool, shoot some hoops, or whatever you like doing and helps you most. If you're looking for a more expressive outlet, you could try keeping a journal to organize your thoughts when you're happy, unhappy, or when you want to tell your mother something. You can write her letters that express your feelings as a way of rebuilding or celebrating the relationship you had with her.

Lastly, Lonely and Depressed, if you find that your grief is impacting your coursework, you may try speaking with an academic advisor or dean about reevaluating your course load or expectations. Having someone at school who's aware of what you're going through may help with your feelings of abandonment, and adjusting your academic responsibilities might give you the opportunity to focus on your grieving without the added pressure to perform in school. You may be able to work with your academic advisor to reduce course work, extend deadlines, or take a leave of absence if needed.

Part of self-compassion is allowing yourself to make the adjustments you need to feel more okay — whether that means asking for additional support in your academic, professional, or personal life. This new loss in your life may feel more manageable if you can arrange to drop a class, take bereavement leave, or even ask someone you trust to help you with some of your more routine responsibilities while you are going through this very difficult time. Your feelings of sadness and abandonment may be an inescapable part of your grieving process, but it is okay to take a step back and seek any and all the support you need as you work to make sense of your loss and begin to heal.

Alice!

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