

## REACTIONS TO THE DEATH OF A PARENT DURING MIDLIFE\*

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### ABSTRACT

Interviews with eighty-three adults aged thirty-five to sixty who had lost a parent one to five years previously found that 60 percent continued to experience emotional reactions and 44 percent continued to experience somatic reactions to the death. The majority also reported changes in their sense of maturity, personal priorities, work and/or career objectives, feelings about their own mortality, and the importance and nature of various social relationships. These impacts generally corresponded to developmentally significant midlife themes of autonomy, personal freedom, and responsibility.

### INTRODUCTION

Coping with the death of one's parents has become a normative developmental task of midlife [1-3]. Between the ages of forty and sixty, more than 50 percent of American women will experience the death(s) of one or both parents [4]. This is in sharp contrast to previous cohorts for whom parental death tended to occur earlier in the lifecycle. In the early 1900s, for example, approximately 25 percent of children experienced a parent's death before the age of fifteen; by 1980, only about 5 percent did so [5]. In 1920, the majority of women experienced the death of a mother before the age of fifty; by 1970, 73 percent of fifty-year-old women

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had a living mother [6]. It is estimated that more than 95 percent of forty-year-old women now have at least one surviving parent [4].

Despite the emergence of parental death as a normative event with potential significance for psychological adaptation and development in midlife, this topic previously has received little empirical attention. Those studies that have been reported to date primarily have investigated the impact of a parent's death on mental health [7-11]. These studies generally have found the death of a parent to be "a serious life event leading to measurable symptomatic distress" [9]. Unresolved grief reactions following a parent's death have been associated with depression, suicidal ideation, and other psychiatric symptoms [8, 9, 11, 12], especially when the death was unexpected or the parent-child relationship was marked by ambivalence or dependency [13].

Seldom has the experience of a parent's death been examined in terms of its developmental significance or its potentially constructive effects, although anecdotal reports of reactions to parental death consistently have described significant changes in self-perceptions, in feelings regarding personal mortality, and in family roles and relationships [14-17]. Such reactions may have implications for healthy adaptation to the developmental tasks of midlife [18-19], particularly those that relate to the acceptance of personal mortality and finitude [20-24]. In this way, parental death may provide a "developmental push" [25], potentially helping to resolve midlife developmental tasks and promote age-appropriate levels of maturity, responsibility, and generativity [3, 22].

This study examined the reactions of middle-aged adults to the death of an elderly parent. In particular, it investigated the extent to which a parent's death impacted respondents' feelings of maturity, personal goals and values, sense of mortality, social roles, and interpersonal relationships.

## METHODOLOGY

### Sample

The study sample consisted of eighty-three adults between the ages of thirty-five and sixty who had lost a parent between one and five years prior to the date of the study. Participants were selected from more than 400 respondents to a newspaper notice regarding a study of parental death. Of the eighty-three participants, sixty-three experienced a mother's death and fifty-one had experienced a father's death during the previous five years: twenty had lost a father only, thirty-two had lost a mother only, and thirty-one had lost both parents. The median age of the participants was forty-nine; 77 percent were women; 47 percent were married; 84 percent were Caucasian; and 57 percent were college graduates.

Participants were interviewed regarding the impact of the parent's death on various aspects of their psychological well-being. These indepth structured interviews were conducted by trained social work interviewers and lasted an average

of one-and-one-half hours. All of the interviews were audiotaped, with the permission of the participants.

## Measures

The interview consisted primarily of questions regarding the impact of the parent's death on aspects of midlife psychological development that have been the focus of previous studies of adult development [26-27], including: 1) self-concept; 2) personal values and goals; 3) work behaviors and career aspirations; 4) attitudes about personal mortality; and 5) religious practices and beliefs. For each of these areas, participants were asked whether they had experienced any changes in their lives as a result of their parent's death and, if so, what specific changes had occurred. Participants who had lost both parents were asked first about the impact of the earlier death and then about the impact of the more recent death. Participants were also asked whether the deaths had impacted their relationships with: 1) their surviving parent, if any; 2) their siblings; 3) their spouse or partner; 4) their children; and 5) their friends.

In addition, participants were asked whether they currently experienced any emotional reactions to the death that interfered with their day-to-day life, and whether their physical health or well-being had been affected by the death.

Interviewers' notes and audio tapes were reviewed by the first author to identify the most common themes that emerged in response to each question. This inductive content analysis approach yielded four or five distinct coding categories for each question. Content analysis of responses to the question about changes in a participant's self-concept attributed to a parent's death, for example, yielded the following categories: no impact, more responsible, more self-confident, more "adult" or more mature in other ways, less mature, or none of the above. Content analysis of responses to the question about changes in religiosity yielded the following categories: no impact, more religious, less religious, or none of the above. Content analysis of questions regarding the impact of the death on family relationships yielded the following categories: closer, more conflictual, neither closer nor more conflictual or none of the above.

Graduate social work students examined participants' responses to each question and assigned each response to one of the inductively derived categories. Then, the distribution of responses across categories for each question was examined separately with regard to the impact of mothers' deaths and fathers' deaths.

## RESULTS

The majority of participants reported continuing to experience a number of emotional and somatic reactions one to five years following a parent's death. For example, in cases involving a mother's death, 67 percent of the respondents

reported still having emotional reactions including sadness and crying (24%), anxiousness and fear (22%) and depression or suicidal ideation (11%). Similar reactions were reported following a father's death, with 51 percent of the respondents reporting some kind of emotional reaction, such as sadness and crying (21%), anxiousness and fear (19%), and depression or suicidal ideation (7%). On the other hand, 9 percent of those who had lost a mother reported feeling a sense of relief or increased happiness after the mother's death, usually related to the termination of demanding care responsibilities. None of the respondents reported positive reactions following a father's death.

Forty-five percent of the participants reported continuing to experience somatic reactions attributed to reactions to the death of a mother, including a general decline in overall health (11%), physical illness (9%), and fatigue (7%). Current somatic reactions following a father's death were reported by 43 percent, including a general decline in overall health (13%), physical illness (8%), and fatigue (5%). Improved physical health following a parent's death was reported by 14 percent of those who had lost a mother and by 13 percent of those who had lost a father. As one female respondent said, "I don't want to die like my father. I'm on a stringent exercise program to make sure I stay healthy."

Changes in self-concept attributed to the impact of a parent's death are shown in Table 1. Of the sixty-three respondents who experienced a mother's death, 81 percent reported that the experience had impacted their self-concept in some way. Twenty-nine percent reported feeling "more mature" or "more adult," 19 percent felt more self-accepting or self-confident, 11 percent felt a greater sense of personal responsibility for their own lives. In response to the death of a father, respondents reported a similar pattern, with 43 percent perceiving themselves as "more mature," 20 percent as more self-confident, and 4 percent as more responsible. As one respondent said, "I'm more independent. I can't call her (my mother) up if I need advice anymore. I feel good about that, it makes myself be counted. I'm accepting the responsibility to be happy."

Fourteen percent of those who had lost a mother and 3 percent of those who had lost a father indicated that they felt less mature or less able to manage on their own following the death, often related to difficulty accepting the additional responsibility and autonomy they now experienced. As one respondent said, "Deep down inside I realize I'm now the head of the family and that bothers me. I guess I just don't like the responsibility. I feel so alone now."

Of the thirty-one respondents who had experienced the deaths of both parents, 89 percent indicated that the fact that both parents died held special significance. Respondents indicated that the loss of both their mothers and fathers heightened their overall sense of aloneness (35%), allowed for more personal control of their own life (26%), made them more acutely aware of the absence of external sources of support (13%), or marked the beginning of a new stage of life incorporating differing personal priorities and relationships (9%). As one respondent who had lost both parents said, "You grow up fast when (both) your parents die. . . . You

Table 1. Reported Impact of Parent's Death on Respondent's Self Concept, Feelings About Mortality, Religiosity, Personal Priorities, and Work or Career Plans

Impacts	Death of Mother (percent) ( <i>n</i> = 63)	Death of Father (percent) ( <i>n</i> = 51)
<b>Self-Concept</b>		
More "adult"	29	43
More self-confident	19	20
More responsible	11	4
Less mature	14	3
Other	8	17
No impact	19	12
<b>Feelings About Mortality</b>		
Increased awareness of own mortality	30	29
More accepting of own death	19	10
Made concrete plans regarding own death	10	4
Increased fear of own death	10	18
Other	14	16
No impact	17	23
<b>Religiosity</b>		
More religious	26	29
Less religious	11	2
Other	3	10
No impact	60	59
<b>Personal Priorities</b>		
Personal relationships more important	35	28
Simple pleasures more important	16	13
Personal happiness more important	10	7
Material possessions less important	5	8
Other	20	8
No impact	14	36
<b>Work or Career Plans</b>		
Left job	29	16
Adjusted goals	15	10
Changed plans due to family needs	5	6
Moved	4	10
Other	13	19
No impact	34	39

consider the fact that this day could be your last so you take nothing for granted. You depend upon yourself, cause in the end that's what you've got."

In response to the question about the impact of the mother's death on the respondents' feelings about their own mortality, 83 percent reported some kind of a change. The most frequent modifications were an increased awareness of personal mortality (30%) and a greater acceptance of death (19%). Ten percent of the participants reported that the death of their mother resulted in increased fear or anxiety regarding their own death. Of the respondents who experienced the death of a father, 77 percent reported changes in their sense of personal mortality, with 29 percent reporting an increased sense of mortality, 10 percent reporting greater acceptance, and 18 percent reporting an increased fear of death.

With regard to changes in religious practices or beliefs since the death of their mother, 26 percent reported becoming more religious while 11 percent characterized themselves as less religious. In response to the death of a father, 29 percent of the respondents reported becoming more religious and only 2 percent indicated that they had become less religious.

In response to the question about changes in personal priorities, 86 percent of the participants reported a shift in their priorities after experiencing a mother's death. For 35 percent of the respondents, personal relationships with friends and family became more important after their mother's death; 16 percent reported giving increased priority to simple pleasures such as experiencing nature or learning something new; 10 percent reported that their own happiness and well-being became more important; and, 5 percent reported that material possessions were less important. In response to the death of a father, 64 percent of the participants mentioned changes in personal priorities, with personal relationships more important for 28 percent, simple pleasures for 13 percent, personal happiness for 7 percent, and material possessions less important for 8 percent.

With regard to work and career, 66 percent of the participants who experienced the death of a mother reported making changes either in their employment or in their career plans. For 29 percent of respondents, their mother's death reportedly contributed directly to their decision to terminate a job, either to take a more desirable position, pursue further education or stop working entirely. Another 15 percent reported making significant changes in career plans or goals. Among respondents who had lost a father, 61 percent reported work or career changes, with 16 percent leaving a job as a result of the father's death and 10 percent changing career plans or goals. The decision to modify work or career plans was attributed most often to changes in self-concept or priorities following the parent's death. As one respondent explained: "My father's death has affected my sense of being independent, and in a way there is a sense of freedom. His death allowed me to think that a career change was important and I could actualize it." In other cases, career changes were made possible primarily through the greater financial independence that resulted from inheritance when a parent died: "I am more

secure with my inheritance. It has changed me materially and I can do more of what I want. I could quit my job and pursue my freelance writing."

Changes in personal relationships following the death of a parent are displayed in Table 2. In response to the deaths of mothers as well as fathers, the greatest changes in personal relationships were reported to have occurred within the family of origin. For example, following a mother's death, 36 percent of the participants with a surviving father reported developing a closer relationship with him and 18 percent described the relationship as being more conflictual or distant. Following the death of a father, 39 percent of the respondents with a surviving mother characterized their relationship with her as closer and 10 percent described it as more conflictual. One respondent said, "I feel more obligated to look after my mother since my father is gone. I appreciate her more and I'm taking better care of my own health so that I can be there when she needs me."

The death of a parent also was perceived to impact relationships with one's siblings. Forty percent of those experiencing a mother's death described closer relationships with siblings, while 25 percent reported more conflict. Thirty-nine percent reported closer sibling relationships after a father's death and 27 percent reported more conflict. Sibling relationships were particularly likely to become more conflictual following the death when the siblings were perceived to have been uncooperative or unsupportive during the parent's illness or where the siblings had had relationship problems when the parent was alive.

As a result of a parent's death, the majority of respondents also indicated changes in their relationships with their spouses/partners and children. Closer spousal/partner relationships after the death of a mother were reported by 30 percent of the respondents, while 20 percent reported more conflictual relationships. In the case of a father's death, closer relationships were reported by 32

Table 2. Reported Impact of Parent's Death on Personal Relationships

Relationship	Death of Mother ( <i>n</i> = 63) (%)			Death of Father ( <i>n</i> = 51) (%)		
	Closer	More Conflictual	No Change	Closer	More Conflictual	No Change
Surviving parent	36	18	21	39	10	23
Siblings	40	25	23	39	27	32
Partner	30	20	41	32	29	29
Children	39	6	49	30	6	52
Friends	42	13	39	26	13	48

**Note:** Percentages do not total to 100 percent due to the existence of idiosyncratic responses which could not be assigned to one of the three categories.

percent of the respondents, while more conflictual relationships were reported by 29 percent. Eleven percent of the respondents indicated that the death had contributed directly to their decision to seek a divorce or separation in a long-term relationship, often because they no longer felt the need to remain together in order to conform to parental expectations. As one respondent explained, "After mom died I felt free to leave my husband. It was a bad relationship." Others indicated that they decided to end the relationship when they realized that their partner was unable to understand the depth of their grief for their deceased parent and provide the support they needed at this difficult time.

Relationships with respondents' own children demonstrated no change following a mother's death for 49 percent of the respondents, with closer relationships reported by 39 percent and more problematic relationships reported by 6 percent. Thirty percent reported closer relationships with their children following the death of a father, while 6 percent reported more conflict.

With regard to relationships with friends, 42 percent of the respondents described the development of closer relationships following a mother's death, 13 percent reported more conflictual relations, and 39 percent indicated no change. In response to a father's death, 26 percent reported closer relationships, 13 percent reported more conflictual relations, and 48 percent indicated no change.

Participants also described several changes in family roles and responsibilities related to a mother's death, including: becoming the primary decision-maker in the family (20%), assuming increased responsibility for maintaining contact among other family members (12%), and acquiring a more parental role within the family (7%); 5 percent reported that they assumed less family responsibility as the result of their mother's death. In response to a father's death, 29 percent reported that they assumed more responsibility for maintaining contact, 11 percent stated that they had become the primary decision maker, and 14 percent felt they had acquired a more parental role; 4 percent reported that they assumed less family responsibility following the death of a father.

## DISCUSSION

Like others who have experienced a significant personal loss, the majority of respondents in this study reported emotional reactions that continued one to five years after the death of a parent [28]. Most prominent were feelings of sadness, anxiousness, fear, and depressive symptoms, although some respondents reported a sense of relief or improved physical health following a parent's death.

For most respondents, the experience of losing a parent reportedly contributed to a greater sense of personal maturity. The majority of respondents spoke of feeling more autonomous, more self-reliant, and more responsible for themselves and others. Respondents also reported increased awareness of the eventuality of their own deaths, often leading to a reevaluation of personal priorities, significant

changes in career plans and personal relationships, and modifications in religious practices.

The changes engendered by a parent's death were perceived as being primarily constructive or growth-producing, particularly as they contributed to greater self-confidence, more acceptance of the finiteness of life, increased attention to personal priorities and goals that previously may have been ignored, improved health habits, and closer relationships with family members and friends. In many cases, the psychological and financial freedom engendered by a parent's death allowed respondents to leave the confines of existing jobs or relationships and take advantage of options and opportunities that otherwise might have gone unexplored.

For some respondents, however, the increased sense of self-sufficiency and personal responsibility prompted by a parent's death was stressful, with some respondents expressing concern about their ability to manage on their own without their parent or anxiety regarding the increased reality of their own mortality. Respondents who had experienced the loss of both parents were particularly likely to describe a sense of "orphanhood," often leading to a feeling of aloneness they had not felt prior to the parents' deaths.

The themes of autonomy, freedom, and responsibility that emerged repeatedly in these respondents' reports of the impact of their parent's death correspond to fundamental issues that have been identified as developmental tasks of middle adulthood [29]. These tasks include achieving a stronger orientation toward self combined with a greater sense of choice, responsibility, and attachment to others [29]. Middle adulthood often involves an increased awareness of oneself, as well as a concomitant increase in one's sense of personal responsibility and commitment [30-31]. For example, Robbins states that middle-age women, when compared with younger women, "respond differently to the social consequences of choice with a greater sense of individuation and instrumentality" [32].

For the respondents in this study, the experience of parental death also contributed to an enhanced awareness of personal finitude, which has been identified as a central developmental task of midlife [20-24]. Neugarten, for example, has proposed that, at some point during midlife, individuals begin to measure their position in the lifecycle in terms of "time left to live" rather than "time since birth" [24]. Many respondents in this study reported that the death of a parent increased their sense of mortality and led to specific concrete behaviors such as drafting a will or making funeral arrangements. Respondents indicated that the acceptance of their own death both resulted from and, in part, supported an increased sense of responsibility for their own life. Such results correspond to earlier research findings which suggest that a sense of direction, responsibility and purpose in midlife is related to a decrease in anxiety regarding one's own mortality [33].

Parental death was reported by respondents to impact their social relations, roles and responsibilities in various ways. Following the death of a parent, many respondents described a process of assessing and restructuring their personal

relationships, often yielding closer, more meaningful interpersonal bonds, particularly following the loss of a mother. This assessment process, frequently associated with a greater sense of autonomy and responsibility in other areas, was consistent with the increased interdependence and mutuality often evidenced in interpersonal relationships during middle and late adulthood [34].

Changes within respondents' family of origin generally involved the adult child's assumption of increased responsibility and involvement with the surviving parent. In many cases, this resulted in opportunities for greater closeness and mutuality with that parent, although some respondents reported more conflictual relationships, especially when the surviving parent was their mother (see also [35]). A number of respondents also indicated that they assumed greater responsibility for preserving family interaction and continuity, often becoming the "head of the family" or the primary family "kinkeeper" [2].

Although in the majority of cases the death of a parent was reported to lead to the establishment of closer familial relationships, in some cases sibling relationships became considerably more distant, often as a result of resentments over the siblings' behavior during the parent's final illness. If this animosity persists, respondents may be sacrificing an important source of practical and emotional support for their own later years [36-37].

For some respondents, the death of a parent led to problems in relationships with spouses or partners. This occurred somewhat more often following a father's death than a mother's death. A surprisingly large number of respondents indicated that the death contributed to their decision to terminate a dissatisfying relationship, often because they no longer felt the pressure of parental expectations. These findings support those of Guttman regarding the association between parental death and marital disruption during midlife [38].

## CONCLUSION

This study suggests that the death of a parent can be a significant life event with consequences for one's sense of self, for one's life perspective, and for various social relationships. The majority of respondents reported that their experience of parental death impacted their sense of maturity, personal priorities, career plans, feelings about their own mortality, and the importance and nature of various social relationships. These impacts generally corresponded to developmentally significant midlife themes of autonomy, personal freedom, and responsibility in one's personal and family life.

Parental death during midlife apparently can serve as a catalyst toward greater autonomy and individuation tempered by an increased sense of personal responsibility and choice. Further, the increased sense of individuation following the death of parent can call forth a greater commitment toward meaningful interpersonal relations. In this way, reactions to a parent's death potentially can contribute to and facilitate the resolution of several important developmental tasks of midlife.

The findings of this study are limited by the retrospective nature of the responses and the possible selection bias inherent in the sampling design. It is likely, for example, that the sample may have been biased toward respondents for whom a parent's death was particularly significant or meaningful. The sample was more highly educated than the general population, likely reflecting the characteristics of the *Los Angeles Times* readership. In addition, the most common time period since a parent's death was one to two years, the time period during which residual grief may be most intense [28]. Therefore, the results of this study cannot be considered representative of all adults who have experienced parental death; nor can they be utilized to estimate the prevalence or extent of normative reactions to parental death.

Despite these limitations, this study provides evidence of the potential importance of parental death as a developmentally significant event in midlife. More research is needed in order to increase our understanding of the nature of parental death during midlife and its normative developmental consequences. Of particular importance would be a prospective study of parental death employing a longitudinal design with a more representative sample of adults who have experienced the death of a parent. Among the issues that might be addressed by such a study are the following: 1) the prevalence of specific grief reactions following a parent's death, including the extent to which work, social, and marital roles are disrupted; 2) changes in roles and relationships in one's family of origin following a parent's death, particularly with regard to the transmission of family roles occupied by the deceased parent; 3) the impact of the death on a respondent's personal values, priorities, and lifestyle; and, 4) the impact of the death on one's sense of mortality, ability to assume increased family responsibility, and other developmental tasks of midlife.

This study is an initial step toward a better understanding of the significance of parental death in midlife. It is hoped that it will stimulate further research regarding the ways in which filial relationships, and their termination, affect the process of adult psychological and social development.

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