

“Shrink Rap”

a regular feature from the University Counseling & Testing Center

LOSING A PARENT IN COLLEGE

Grief is a process of learning to stand what you can't. This came home to me through my own experience with loss and grief. My wise and wonderful neighbor said something that carried me through the 32 months after my husband's diagnosis with brain cancer, his death, and beyond. She said, "This isn't about not being *able* to stand it. It will *teach* you how to stand it." Grief has been an effective teacher over the past 4 years, sometimes direct and relentless, other times waiting patiently while I focused on what needed to be done, always there to remind me that things had undeniably changed.

Before I experienced this loss, I worked with students who had lost a parent just before coming to college or while in college, and I had assumed that they would want to talk about their loss, have a place to vent and cry and ask 'why?' These students taught me, indirectly, that many of them press on, harboring their grief and venturing forth into academic, work, and athletic pursuits. They needed, first, to know that they will be to "make it" in college before wading into the unknown waters of unimaginable loss. When they do come into counseling soon after the loss, complaints of anxiety, feeling 'different' than their peers, loss of concentration and sleeping difficulties are common. They sometimes say they "don't want to talk about it" and "don't know what to say to friends." They wish friends would ask how they are doing, and complain that friends ask too often. After a while, they wish they could talk about their memories of their lost loved one, but their friends' well-intentioned pity stops them. It's a complicated place to be, out in the whirling world when your world has stopped.

Losing a parent heralds unexpected changes for the family, too. Changes in financial resources can spark concerns about being able to finish college, and sometimes a transfer to a college closer to home is necessary. Also, the loss of one parent often means the loss of a partner for the surviving parent. Changes in the student's relationship with their surviving parent are common as everyone tries to adjust their lives to this loss. These are significant and unexpected shifts in life as we know it.

At the Counseling and Testing Center, individual counseling can offer students a safe harbor, a check point, and a guiding hand through their adjustment to the loss. We also watch for depression or other emotional/behavioral problems that can complicate mourning. Students can join our wonderful Living With Loss group where they have a chance to talk with other students who are grieving. Here, they don't have to censor themselves or feel 'different.' Here, they can learn how to take care of themselves through the adjustments and challenges. Here, they find kindred spirits who understand the careful, and sometimes raw, language of grief.

While time, itself, does not heal, grief cannot be rushed. It is a natural process, and with support, it fosters strength and resilience that can serve us well when other storms blow through. We support students in this process, connecting them with other students who understand, and giving them a kind and welcoming place to grieve and grow. It is often difficult for grieving parents to also meet the needs of other grieving family members, especially from afar. If your student is experiencing a loss, please recommend us to them.

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