



The Grieving Teen
Helen Fitzgerald

What if I Feel the 'Wrong' Thing?

Teens Ask Helen About Grief

Helen Fitzgerald's column for Beliefnet focuses on the grief of children and teens. If you are a teenager dealing with loss, or a parent struggling to help your children come to terms with grief, consider Helen's column a resource.

Q1. You wrote about kids getting depressed when somebody dies. That's fine, but what about kids like me who have to spend all their time taking care of a sick mother? Nobody has died in my family, but I am depressed anyway because I feel that life is passing me by. I know I'm being selfish to say this, but I almost wish that she would die. Am I a lost cause, or is there something I can do to save my life from going down the drain?

A1. The fact that you were able to write me this question tells me that you are not a lost cause. Because you're a teenager only once, I can understand your feeling that opportunities are passing you by--friendships, parties, sports, and, of course, romance. Having to take care of an ailing parent is not part of anyone's agenda for the Ideal Adolescence.

So you're feeling selfish. I'll tell you something, you aren't the only one. When my first husband lay in a coma month after month, dying with terminal cancer, I also had days I secretly wished he would die. You don't have to feel guilty about thinking such a thought, just so long as you do nothing to make it happen.

It sounds like you are feeling overwhelmed by the pressures on you. You have a right to feel somewhat depressed. Your mother is evidently in failing health, and you are being deprived of the wonderful services that mothers normally provide. Now it's almost as if you were the mother.

Of course, you want your mother to be well cared for, and I'm sure you are doing a good job, no matter how you wish you could be doing something else. But you may not have to miss out on *everything*. Even if you have to be at home nursing your mother, you ought to be able to spend some time on the phone with friends. Discuss it with your parents and work out some ground rules on use of the phone, making sure that it's available for essential calls but clearing certain times for your use. With call-waiting, a relatively inexpensive feature to add to your phone, no one will have to worry about missing a phone call.

I know from your question that you've read my column, [When Depression Is Real](#). You might want to read it again, and show it to your folks, to be sure everyone understands the seriousness of depression.

One of the themes of that column is the beneficial effect of talking things out. Talking--communication in any form--can help you now. I suggest that you start talking--with your mother, your father, any siblings you may have, and your friends. Not talking about your mother's illness especially, but about your need to maintain some semblance of a normal social life. Out of these discussions may come any number of ideas for improving your situation. It is possible, for example, that once your father realizes how strongly you feel, he might be able to rearrange his schedule to open up some social time for you to be with your friends. You may have an aunt or uncle, sister or brother who could relieve you on occasion. Or maybe you could have some friends over to the house once in a while. The key element here is communicating your concerns so that people understand what you are saying--that you are depressed and that you need help, too. It might not hurt to let your dad, a sibling, or a relative read this exchange between us.

Depression resulting from any cause, whether it is the death of a loved one or circumstances like yours, requires attention. It may be that you will start to feel better once you have started

talking about your depression. But if you don't feel better soon, I suggest you tell your parents that you think you need some outside help. If your family attends a church, there may be a counselor or religious advisor there who can help. Or see your counselor at school, who should be able to direct you to a community mental health center, where you could be referred to a therapist. If money is a concern, most mental health centers have a sliding scale for fees. They will work with you on the fee. Some mental health centers even have time set aside for "teen walk-ins" and that is usually free.

Depression is more than just feeling sad or frustrated; it can be much more, depending on what you do or don't do about it. Taking care of your mother is important, but taking care of yourself is important, too. Once everyone realizes how important it is to attend to the needs of both of you, I believe you will find a way to do so. When you take care of yourself, you will have more energy and willingness to do your part in taking care of your mom.

Q2. My grandfather died a few days ago. My mother and father both seem really depressed over his death, but I feel fine. I'm not depressed. Since I'm not as sad as the rest of my family, I wonder if they think I didn't love him. Is there something wrong with me?

A2. Just because you aren't feeling sad or depressed at the moment doesn't mean that you didn't love your grandfather. Since it was important enough for you to ask the question, I am sure you loved your grandfather as much as everyone else.

Grief is different for everybody and often comes in waves. One day things are fine and you're looking forward to exciting things, and the next day something hits you that throws you into the dumps. This might happen one summer day when you start remembering the fishing trips you went on with your grandfather and suddenly realize that there will never be a fishing trip with your granddad again. Or, you might be playing in a baseball game and see a man who looks like your grandfather. For an instant you start to call out to him, only to remember that he's dead! It is at times like these that the full impact of the loss will hit you, bringing on a period of sadness or even depression.

You may not be feeling the impact of your grandfather's death as much as your mother and father because they are dealing with the death of a parent, and that hurts a lot no matter how old you may be. Your grief is different partly because you are a generation removed from your grandfather. You may have known and loved your grandfather since you were born, but think how many more years he was an important part of your parents' lives. That doesn't mean that you won't feel sad and miss your grandfather very much, but your grief is bound to be different from that of your parents. You need not feel guilty about this, nor should anyone expect you to.

Helen Fitzgerald is a nationally-respected educator, author, and lecturer on bereavement. Her books include 'The Grieving Child: A Parents' Guide,' and 'The Mourning Handbook.'