



**The Grieving Teen**  
**Helen Fitzgerald**

## When Teenagers Lose a Parent

Over the years, I have met with many teens who were struggling with personal losses of one kind or another, but by far the greatest number were trying to adjust to the death of a parent. The unique relationship between parent and child makes such a loss painful at any age. But to have a parent die when you're a teenager is especially difficult.

Why is the death of a parent so devastating to a teen? I think the explanation lies in the process that we call adolescence. In these teenage years, you are moving from childhood to adulthood; a big step, involving lots of changes, both physical and psychological. For the parent, adolescence means a gradual transfer of power, the loosening of bonds. For the teenager, it means acquiring and using power in stages that permit movement toward becoming a self-assured adult. As in any transfer of power, things don't always go smoothly. Family members may not even like each other very much during this time. Quarreling, fighting, or screaming are not uncommon. If a parent dies during these crucial, turbulent years, it can leave a teenager with unfinished business--things left unsaid or undone.

An example of unfinished business would be an ongoing struggle between a mother and daughter that is left unresolved when the mother dies. Suddenly, the daughter finds herself wracked with guilt. She feels guilty about not listening to her mother, guilty about things she said, and guilty about not spending more time with her mother when she was terminally ill. Parents have huge, forgiving hearts and would never want their children troubled by such memories. But how do you forgive yourself?

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Here is an approach I have found to be helpful. Take out a piece of paper and write down everything that is making you feel guilty. Then go through your list and strike through all those items that are merely regrets. Regrets are *wishes*--things we wish we had done or said. For example, you may feel bad if you didn't have a chance to say good-bye, but there is no reason to feel guilty about that. That is a regret about circumstances you could not control. It's right to recognize your sadness about the way things turned out, but wrong to blame yourself. As you go through your list, you will eliminate a lot of things that you clearly need not feel guilty about.

On the other hand, perhaps items on your list involve hurtful actions you took that really merit some measure of guilt. Guilt is an *action* word. It is something you said or did that you feel badly about now. For instance, if you hit your father, or knowingly wounded your mother with words, that is something anyone would feel guilty about. Find someone you trust to share this list with--someone who will hear you out and not change the subject. You can't apologize directly to your parent any longer, but you may be surprised at the relief that comes from just admitting out loud that you were wrong.

Still, be careful with hindsight. Most disagreements look trivial in the light of death. Now that you know the end of the story, it is easy to look back and beat yourself up. But we all make mistakes, and we all have to learn to make amends as best we can.

How do you make amends? One teen I met with recently wrote a message to her late father on a biodegradable helium balloon and sent it aloft. Another teen wrote a letter to his dead mother and put it in her casket. You might do something similar, saying all the things you wish you had said when your parent was alive. Then, as you go through your list, think of things you

can do to translate your guilt into something positive--like planting a garden in your mother's memory or volunteering at a shelter for the homeless as a memorial to your father. But if there are matters for which you feel you cannot make amends, I suggest that you get professional help. No matter what you have done, you have a right to make a life for yourself. Your parent would want that for you.

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What if the loss you face doesn't fit the storybook mold? What if the parent you lost was hateful, abusive, unworthy of either love or respect? Sad but true, there are parents like that. Are you obligated to mourn that person's passing? No. You might even feel relieved now that the tension is gone from your family. But even in a case like this, I suspect you will still feel guilt for some failing or other. The children of such parents are more likely than other people to feel guilt, because such relationships generate self-doubt and leave lots of unfinished business. You will also have to grieve the end of any dreams you may have had that your parent would one day come to appreciate you more and be the type of parent you always wanted. Unfortunately, that isn't ever going to happen. What you can do is make a promise to yourself that when you are a parent, you will be the parent to your children that you wish you had had.

Losing a parent is sad and hard at any age--even late in life--but it's doubly sad when you're just figuring out what it is to be a man or a woman. If you have lost a parent, you have my sympathy, no matter what the circumstances were, no matter how good or bad your relationship was. But regardless of how you feel--guilty, shattered, fearful, lonely, desolate--I assure you that you have a future. And it begins today.

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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.'](#)

Helen Fitzgerald's column for Beliefnet focuses on the grief of children and teens.