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Chapters

turning the pages through grief

Lessons of Loss:

What Losing Both Parents at 29 has Taught Me

By Josephine Haefner

The death of a parent changes you. It transforms you in ways that you never knew. Grief swallows you up with sorts of emotions like fear, anxiety, and sadness. Grief can also mold you and shape you into a stronger person. I lost my mother to suicide when I was 9. My dad passed away from an unexpected stroke this past June. His death catapulted me into adulthood overnight. It was sudden and unexpected.

You might be thinking—girl, aren't you 29 years old, a mother to two, and already in adulthood?

Yes, but I had always relied on my dad to bail me out. My dad was one of my best friends. Even if we were fighting, he was always my rock. He was my safety net. I knew that no matter what happened, my dad would always be there to talk and guide me through it. Losing my mother was devastating, but losing my father at 29? That was a tragedy. Here are 8 lessons that I learned from losing both my parents.

■ You Can't Rely on Anyone but Yourself

I always relied on my dad to bail me out. To cover an unexpected cost if something happened. My dad was a doctor. He provided an amazing life for me. Now, I can't rely on anyone financially besides myself. Not having my parents has molded me into a hard-worker. I am a single mother of two toddlers, and I work full time. I have to look out for my mental and physical health while being the best mom I can

be. I can't pour from an empty cup, so I have to make sure I am always self-aware of how I am feeling, while navigating my new normal.

■ I judge people less and myself more

I have been through a lot in my life. I have been through immense heartache, tragedy, and loss. If it is one thing that the death of my parents has taught me is that you can't judge someone. No one is perfect. We do not know what is in each person's heart or soul. You have no idea what a person may be battling or going through, so be kind. This past year made me take a hard look in the mirror at myself before judging others.

■ Don't Complain about the "Little Things"

We are all suffering or fighting some kind of battle. But, with that, I wish more people would realize what they have before they start complaining. Do you have a roof over your head? Is there food on the table? Are your parents



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You are never too old to set another goal or to dream a new dream.

~C.S. Lewis

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alive? Do you have a family that loves you and a home you can always run too? From experiencing what I have been through, I know I am an amazing empathizer. I can feel others' pain and I can relate to you if you have lost something or someone.

I realized though, I am bad at hearing others complain about something small or trivial. My brain just automatically goes to my own huge tragedies. I am working on improving this as I am not trying to belittle what you may be going through. Just understand that after going through some deep and heavy stuff, it is hard for me to empathize with little complaints. Maybe to you, it isn't trivial because it is your own battle. Although, if you are complaining to me about something surface level, or materialistic, I may not be the friend to vent too. Now if you have some big, heavy, tragic stuff weighing you down, call me, because I can give you some pro-tips.

■ I became More Spiritual and an “Old Soul”

Life is short. Really, really short. This time on this earth is limited. I know this isn't a fun, uplifting thought, but that's the reality. That is life. You realize that on a deeper spiritual level after losing those who gave you your life. It is something that others may not understand until they, too, experience this type of grief or loss. Bear with us for those who have, because we may go all philosophical or spiritual on you. But it's because these events transformed us. It made us realize what is really important in life.

■ Health & Living Life to the Fullest

What is really important to me? For starters, my two daughters are my world. I love fitness and health because I understand our mortality. Realizing life is short, I do not want to drink as much

as I use too. I can't hit up Taco Bell at 2 a.m. anymore. (Okay maybe on special occasions, because sometimes I crave chalupas.) Health and fitness are my priority, so if my children have children, I can be an amazing “Glam-Ma” to them. Yes, I already have given myself a grandma name. I will do everything in my power to remain active and healthy.

On top of the physical side of wellness, I will make my own mental health a priority. If I am not feeling up to going out or hanging out, it is because I recognize that self-care is vital for my survival. I can't pour from an empty cup. I love helping others, but I have to help my children and myself first.

■ No One can Fill That Void

My heart has these holes in it from the loss of both my parents. I am so thankful for strong women role models who have been very motherly to me throughout my life. I am thankful for those friends who have “adopted” me into their families and invite me over. I find myself being jealous of those who have these tight-knitted families. No person, drugs, or amount of material things can ever fill the void of my mom and dad. I will always carry that pain with me, but I can tell you sincere relationships and loving friendships help.

■ Holidays and Birthdays are Hard

When I was younger, my mom decorated our house so beautifully for Christmas, and my whole family would always go to midnight mass and have an amazing meal. For Easter, my dad would always write me and my daughters these elaborate poems and scavenger hunts for finding our Easter baskets.

Holidays are hard when everyone around you is celebrating traditions with their family. It is a reminder that your parents aren't there to celebrate

or give you the little gifts that you are used to. Birthdays are extra hard because my parents gave me my life. The first people that knew me and raised me are gone. The other day one of my best friends asked me what I was doing for Thanksgiving and invited me to her family's house. I teared up because I was so thankful for her friendship. If you know someone who may be alone during the holidays or birthdays, reach out to them and invite them over. Even if they decline, it will mean so much.

■ Gratitude and Love Wins

I could be bitter. I could be angry at God. Why do I have to live the rest of my life without my parents? Why do my daughters have to grow up without knowing how awesome and amazing my parents were? I could play the self-pity game but that only hurts me and others around me.

I was talking to someone the other day and sharing my story about not having my parents. He said “Wow! It is incredible that you are still always smiling and love to laugh after all that.”

I try to wake up every day feeling blessed and journal one thing I am thankful for. I try to remember my dad's words for when I was having a bad day: “Josie, go to bed, sleep, and tomorrow the sun will rise. God has given you a new day to love those around you!”

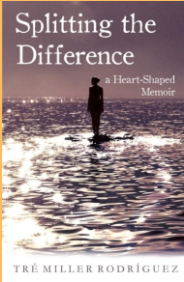
This is isn't to say that I won't ever be sad, or cry. I allow myself to cry and feel my feelings. In order for me to move forward, I decided to turn my loss into love, my despair into hope, and lastly, my doubt into faith.

Josephine Haefner lives in Mankato, Minnesota and is the mother of two daughters, Eden and Genevieve. When she isn't working her full-time job in sales, she can be found writing, teaching spin classes or hiking with her dog Maia.

bookmarks

At age 18, Tré Miller Rodríguez gave up her baby for adoption. The following year, her only sibling died in a car accident. When Tré was 34, her husband, Alberto, passed away unexpectedly. But Tré's life took a shift when, at age 36, her daughter found her on Facebook. In an honest and inspiring narrative, *Splitting the Difference* tells the story of a woman who finds an entirely new side of herself as she quits her job, reunites with her daughter, and comes to terms with the death of her late husband.

shereads.com



A New Year's Resolution

for Grievers



I resolve to take you with me into the new year and then every day after that.

I'll hold onto memories of you, each a separate thread connected to our life together. I'll jumble them up into a ball, so I'm not constantly getting tangled in the past. But I'll make sure I can still pull out a single string whenever I want to remember.

I resolve to talk to other people about you. I'll tell someone who never knew you about the type of person you were. I'll ask those who knew you to share their stories with me.

I'll sing the songs you used to sing. I'll watch the movies you loved. I'll say the phrases you used to say.

I will play both parts of our relationship because you cannot speak for yourself, and I'll accept this one-sided, unrequited love because it's all there is. I will be happy with what I have left of you but feel sad for what I've lost. And this grief loop will play on repeat forever, and I will be okay with that.

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