

When your parents die

No matter how old you are, it's always a shock. Yet losing the support system that's been there all your life can have profound and even positive results

WORDS MADELEINE BAILEY

With the average UK lifespan now at 80 and more than 440,000 over-90s currently living in England and Wales, many of us are now middle-aged or older by the time we lose our parents.

I'm 48 and lucky that both my parents, aged 83 and 92, are still alive and relatively well. But it's recently dawned on me that at some point in the not-too-distant future they will no longer be here. The death of parents may be part of the natural order, but the reality is hard to imagine. They have always been a constant in my life, but one day they won't be at the end of a phone line. This is a foundation-shaking thought. So does being middle-aged or older make the death of our parents easier to deal with – or is it harder as we've been used to having them around for so much longer?

Undervalued loss

Considering it's something that happens to almost all of us, there's very little research on this subject. The main reason for this is probably *because* it is so common, suggests counsellor Alison Thompson, from Cruse Bereavement Care. 'Death

of elderly adults is the norm – it's accepted in Western society to be the correct order, and so there can be an expectation you should get over it fairly quickly,' she says. This, along with the difficulty many of us have with discussing death, can have a silencing – and isolating – effect. Jacqui Cleaver, 33, a businesswoman from Poole in Dorset, lost her mother after a sudden heart attack in 2010, and her father to cancer three years later. 'A lot of my friends and family have been fantastically supportive, but I do feel there's a time limit on grief and an expectation that after a certain period you must have got over it. But you don't ever get over it, you just learn to live with it,' she says. 'Unless you've been through it, you can't really understand what that loss feels like. It makes you feel vulnerable.'

The death of both parents has a life-altering effect whatever your age, according to Alison Thompson. 'Your parents are part of your identity – they shape you in your formative years. I've known people of all ages who've said when their parents died they felt like they lost a sense of self,' she says.

Emma East, 23, from Hertfordshire, became an orphan last year when her dad died from lung cancer. She lost her mum five years previously to motor





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How to get through it

Understand that grief is individual

‘No two people experience grief in the same way. It can include powerful, conflicting emotions, ranging from guilt, and sadness, to depression, anger and relief. This is all normal,’ says Alison Thompson.

Allow yourself to grieve ‘Sometimes people keep overly busy in order to avoid dealing with their grief and feelings. But this can result in delayed grief, sometimes years later,’ says Dr Sherylin Thompson.

Keep to a routine She adds, ‘This can help to preserve a sense of normality and help you to stay connected in the world.’

Find a trusted person to talk to

It’s important to be able to air your emotions. ‘If you’re feeling stuck in your grief or are having problems functioning, don’t be afraid to ask for professional help,’ suggests Alison Thompson.

Be prepared for loss

Think about your relationship The death of our parents isn’t something most of us want to dwell on, but preparing for the inevitable can help the grieving process. ‘Try to deal with any unresolved issues,’ suggests Dr Sherylin Thompson. ‘However, if this isn’t possible, you may have to come to terms with and accept your relationship as it is,’ she adds.

Treasure your time together ‘Think about things you want to ask them now and enjoy being with them while you can,’ says Jacqui.

Be practical Dying Matters, a national coalition that aims to change public knowledge, attitudes and behaviours towards death and bereavement, encourages families to talk candidly about death-related issues and to ensure their emotional and financial affairs are in order before they die. Visit www.dyingmatters.org.

Capture memories Emma advises: ‘Take photos of your parents, film them and record their voices sometimes, too. It may be your only chance to hear stories about your childhood and your parents’ lives, so have them talk about it. And, if a parent is terminally ill and you have kids, ask them to write Christmas and birthday cards for their grandchildren up to their 18th birthdays, so they can still be a part of their future.’ ▶



neurone disease and feels a keen sense of loss of her own history and roots. 'I have questions about my childhood but there's no one to ask as I have no siblings. That's hard to deal with.'

Positive changes

Not all effects are negative. A common response to the death of parents is that individuals become aware of their own mortality. Alison Thompson explains: 'When someone's parents die, they become more aware life is finite. This can cause some people to become anxious or depressed, but it can propel others to make positive changes.' Jacqui agrees: 'My parents were in their 60s when they died and it made me very health-conscious. I suspect stress affected my parents' health so I've taken up yoga and make a point of having family time at the weekends.'

The death of parents can also trigger changes in areas such as career and relationships, Dr Sherylin Thompson, member of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), states: 'People may become more conscious of their own needs.' Helen Hunt, 45, from Manchester, whose parents died over 10 years ago, says: 'It prompted me to re-evaluate my priorities. I'd had enough of my stressful job and looked for something I really wanted to do. I began writing and now I make a living from short stories. My biggest regret is my parents didn't see me in my new career.'

Rite of passage

One theme that often crops up is the feeling of finally becoming an adult yourself, regardless of biological

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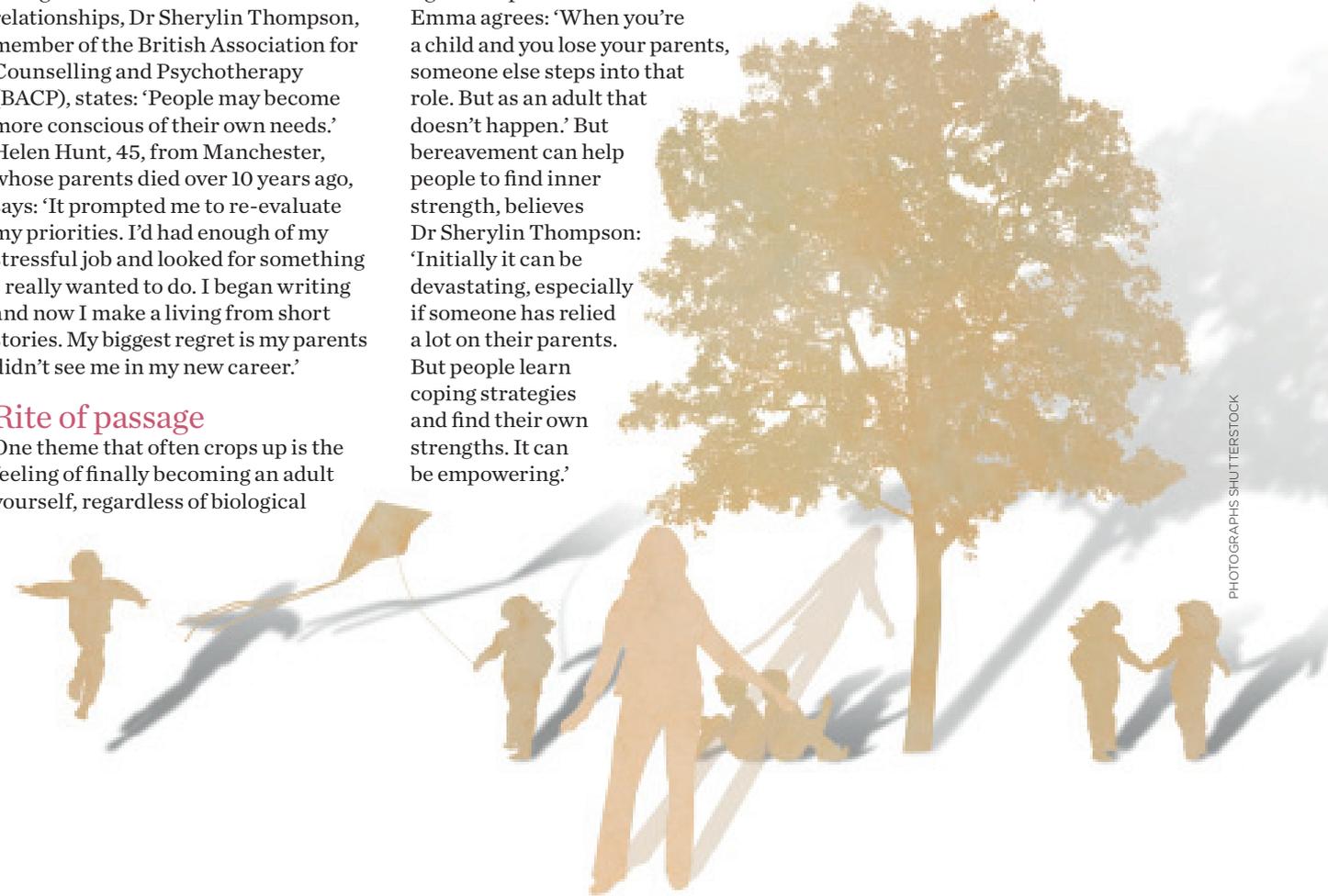
years. 'You are not a true adult until both of your parents have passed on; you are then an orphan,' John F Kennedy Jr said after the death of his mother Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis in 1994. This resonates with Jacqui. 'It sounds ridiculous because I was in my early 30s when my parents died, with my own company, property and a long-term partner and children, yet I felt as if I'd suddenly become a grown-up for the first time.' Emma agrees: 'When you're a child and you lose your parents, someone else steps into that role. But as an adult that doesn't happen.' But bereavement can help people to find inner strength, believes Dr Sherylin Thompson: 'Initially it can be devastating, especially if someone has relied a lot on their parents. But people learn coping strategies and find their own strengths. It can be empowering.'

5 ways to help someone who's grieving

Counsellor Alison Thompson from Cruse Bereavement Care, says:

- 1 Acknowledge their loss. It could just be saying, 'I was so sorry to hear about your mum,' to show you care.
- 2 Only offer help if you can provide it. There's nothing worse than saying you'll help, then not delivering.
- 3 Don't be embarrassed if they get upset. Crying isn't shameful or weak. It's important for bereaved people to release their emotions.
- 4 Call occasionally to ask how they are. Many bereaved people say they feel forgotten after the funeral.
- 5 Take your cue from them if they want to talk about their loss. **ii**

For more on Cruse Bereavement Care's services, visit www.cruse.org.uk or call 0844 477 9400. To find a therapist near you, visit BACP's website at www.bacp.co.uk.



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