

Death of a parent

Many of us have a fantasy that our deaths will be in our sleep and at the same time as a partner we have been living with for several decades.

The likelihood of this happening is remote, the reality being that one elderly partner will generally die first, and may have a lingering illness difficult for all to manage.

It is important for the rest of the family to think carefully about the practical side of the death of a partner and implications for the remaining parent.

Many older couples have comfortably divided various responsibilities. Perhaps the husband has looked after all the banking and the bills, and the wife has done most of the cooking and laundry and kept the house organised.

Suddenly, a widowed wife is faced with needing to look after bills and banking when she has always left that to him. Or a widower is faced with having to shop and look after himself properly.

Suddenly having to learn these skills when they are feeling most vulnerable and when their faculties may be diminishing is a tough call and a big demand. If families are aware of these issues, there is a lot they can do to step in and help.

On the emotional front, the surviving parent will be missing their partner, even if they seem to have bickered right through their 40-year marriage.

If the dead partner was responsible for organising the social life, there may now be a risk of isolation because many elderly couples don't socialise a lot outside the family.

Adult children may become anxious about losing the surviving parent. Parents are our links to our beginnings, and experiencing a break in that chain because of a parent's death is very upsetting.

We may become impatient with our surviving parent, so we need to try to develop more patience. We tend to think that because our parents have seen more loss and grief than we have, due to their age, they will also know how to handle it.

But that's not true. When you get a mix of grief and ageing, you will find yourself listening to the same stories over and over.

But grieving people need to be able to tell these repetitive stories and know they have a sympathetic ear. That's all part of getting through this immensely painful part of life.

Survival tips

- The surviving parent might need help, either to support them in carrying out everyday living tasks or in learning how to do them
- Be patient when a grieving parent tells the same story repeatedly
- Even if they seemed to bicker with the dead partner for 40 years, the surviving parent will feel immense loneliness.