

No Quick Fix for Childhood Grief

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THIS month on CNN, Anderson Cooper and Stephen Colbert engaged in a candid conversation about the long-term effects of childhood grief. Mr. Cooper was 10 years old when his father died of a heart attack. Mr. Colbert also was 10 when his father died in a plane crash that also took two of his brothers' lives. Their early losses, both men agreed, shaped their priorities, their worldviews and the adults they ultimately became.

"I was personally shattered," Mr. Colbert recalled. "And then you kind of reform yourself in this quiet, grieving world that was created in the house."

This story I know well. My mother died of breast cancer in 1981, when she was 42 and I was 17. At the time, I thought grieving was a five-stage process that could be rushed through and aced, like an easy pop quiz. When I still painfully missed my mother three and five and even 10 years later, my conclusion was that I must have gotten grieving wrong.

It took me quite a few years of therapy; interviews with hundreds of other motherless daughters and several books written on the subject to finally let go of the cultural message that grief is something to be "gotten over" in the service of "moving on." I'm hoping the Cooper-Colbert interview will help save others that kind of time.

What their conversation brings to light is how tenacious and recurrent childhood grief can be. It often flares up around anniversary events, such as birthdays and holidays; makes appearances at life milestones, like graduations and weddings; and sneaks up at age-correspondence events, such as reaching the age a parent was when he or she died. That's a big one.

It also appears in regular, everyday moments. Mr. Colbert spoke about still being undone by the song "Band on the Run,"

which was playing in heavy rotation the month his father and brothers died. Similarly, every time I hear "Love Will Keep Us Together" by Captain and Tennille, I'm transported back into a wood-paneled basement circa 1978 where I'm teaching my mother how to dance the Continental, and missing her feels raw and fresh again. Then it passes.

To lose a parent in the 1980s was to do so in the Dark Ages of grief support. Stoicism, silence and suppression were still the ethos of the day. It would take me five years to be able to say "my mother" without crying. I wish I could say I was an anomaly, but I've met so many others with this story that at some point I began wondering if we were the norm.

Yet despite all the progress made in organized bereavement support over the past 40 years, very few services exist to

Losing a family member at a young age has lasting impacts.

day for adults bereaved during childhood and adolescence. And this is a puzzling omission, because millions of Americans fall into this category. A New York Life Foundation nationwide survey of 1,006 adults age 25 and over revealed that 14 percent of those surveyed lost a parent or sibling before the age of 20. If we apply that percentage to the United States adult population as a whole, even conservatively, nearly 30 million people in America experienced the death of an immediate family member during childhood or adolescence.

Why is this important? Because we know that mismanaged and unexpressed grief can surface later as unregulated anger, take root as depression or disease and fuel a desire to self-medicate. Imagine a population of 30 million people with

stories of major, early loss, many of them unspoken and suppressed. Then look around.

Unmourned losses from the past may be a public health crisis. A child's response to major loss depends on several factors, including the cause of death, the closeness of the relationship and the child's developmental stage.

Very young children may not yet understand what death means. They'll come to that awareness later, as their intellect matures. Teenagers have to balance the typical tasks of adolescence with the extraordinary demands of mourning. If overwhelmed by both, they may push one aside for a while, only to revisit it 10 years down the road.

Early, major loss can derail a life narrative and shatter a child's sense of safety and assumptions about the future. As Anderson Cooper shared, his father's death "changed the trajectory of my life. I am a different person than I feel like I was meant to be."

Western culture has been labeled "death denying," but really, death-dodging is just as accurate. We skid away from discomfort and vulnerability around grief. We like prescriptions, easy instructions and a sense of mastery and control. Given a choice, we'll opt for the quick fix. Every time.

Two Thursday nights ago on national television, Anderson Cooper and Stephen Colbert said the quiet part out loud: There is no quick fix here. The effects of early parent loss reverberate throughout a lifetime.

Continuing this conversation is more than a dialogical exercise. It's a social responsibility. No adult left behind. We need to keep educating one another about the long arc of childhood grief and offering support to everyone along its route. □

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