

Letting Grief Move In, But Not Take Over

By Abby Schirmacher

It was November 27th, 2018 when I lost my mom to pancreatic cancer. Fifteen months earlier, I was starting my senior year of high school when we received her diagnosis. Her sickness and the months following her passing were a blur. I was numb. But one thing is clear – she was the most important person in my life, and losing her was devastating. It still is.

Every so often I take a minute away from the hustle and bustle of my daily life to breathe and to be alone with my thoughts. I stop for a second and think, “Why me? What if life would have been different?”

Sometimes, my grief makes me yearn for the past. Mostly, it makes me stronger. I still wish that didn’t have to be the case.

About 48,220 people will [die of pancreatic cancer](#) in a given year – 22,950 of which will be women. According to [Cancer.net](#), “It accounts for 7% of all cancer deaths. The death rate has very slowly increased each year since 2000.”

So I often wonder why Mom had to be a product of these statistics. My spunky, flamboyant, say-it-like-it-is mother that made friends wherever she went and loved her people and life unconditionally. My mom, a woman who brought together 500-plus friends, family members and acquaintances to celebrate her life after her passing. She was too good to mourn in black attire and sighs of woe.

Mom moved mountains for the people she loved. Every single morning she awoke before me and my younger brother to have breakfast ready before we left for school. During my first few months of college, although her health was steadily declining and chemotherapy was kicking her butt, she drove to my dorm to pick up my laundry and bring buckets of clothes back to me, clean and folded. “So you don’t have to worry about an extra thing,” she’d say.

I miss my five-foot-two, hundred and ten pound Jewish mother that couldn’t take no for an answer. She flocked to the sale sections of her favorite stores and made sure that when she wanted something, she got it immediately. She lit up every single room she entered. She left a legacy that lately I feel intimidated by, hoping I can find it in me to keep it alive.

Losing Mom at a young age obviously changed my life drastically. But it was especially hard to make room for grief when I live in a society that shuns it.

In the United States, we respond to “how are you” with “good” and we smile when we walk past strangers. We swallow negative emotions and compartmentalize our inner demons. We treat grief like a taboo when the reality is, we’re all feeling it in one way or another. Whether it’s losing a parent or a dog, grief plays a role in everyone’s life.

From the day my mom died, I’ve decided to take my grief journey into my own hands. I found a counselor and began seeing her before the rest of my family, to soon after convince my dad and brother to join me. I read self-help books and studied childhood grief to understand that what I was feeling is normal. I scoured the internet for someone to relate to, and found a podcast called “The Dead Parent Club,” hosted by a woman living in the United Kingdom. I listened week after week to guests sharing their stories, to eventually record [my own episode](#). I talk about Mom every chance I get because I want to celebrate and remember her to the fullest extent. But for many, this isn’t the case.

Though it’s difficult to understand how to carry the burden of grief in a death-denying society, that’s not the hardest part about losing a parent at a young age. For me, it’s heartbreaking to be surrounded by friends who as they grow older, their relationship with their moms grow stronger. I desperately wish I could foster that same “adult” relationship with my mom. One where I could consider her more of a friend than a parent. Where I could exchange sentiments on relationships, emotional well-being and the realities of life.

I often find myself feeling emotional in moments of triumph, growth and success. Job opportunities, awards, milestones and entering different chapters of my life feel bittersweet. I am stumbling upon “firsts” that I will never share with Mom – my first heartbreak, nearing college graduation, landing a job, promotions, new friends, etc. My mom will not be there in the future for major events like a wedding, having children, buying a house and other staples in life that are typically accompanied by parents and even grandparents. Take living through a global pandemic, a year I’ve spent wondering, “What would Mom think about *this*?”

In the United States, [about 3.5% of children under age 18](#) have lost a parent. Though I’m definitely not alone, I’m rarely surrounded by friends and peers who understand what it feels like to be in my shoes. I bite my tongue when my friends talk about their mom’s home-cooked meals and warm hugs. I leave the room when my roommates call their moms to spill relationship drama. But I’ve learned that I can’t hide from the loss of my mom forever.

Grief doesn’t necessarily have to be negative. Grief initiates growth. Especially because it’s much more common than one would think. According to [The Recovery Village](#) “About 2.5 million people die in the United States annually, each leaving an average of five grieving people behind.”

I wish someone would have told me prior to Mom dying to embrace life and to take the time to appreciate every moment. I wish I would've known how to approach people around me grieving – to support them, uplift them and be an ear to listen more than anything else.

I yearn for a future where we can help each other through the perils of grief. Transforming the way we view grief as a society could eliminate many barriers grieving individuals face. Maybe then, we can dedicate more time to remembering the souls we've lost.