



---

## ***Being a motherless daughter on Mother's Day***

**Dr Carrie Lethborg**

*Mum, Mom, Mother, Mummy, her first name ...* regardless of how we refer to her, the relationship we have with the woman who raised us can be multifaceted, complex and profound. Losing her is a unique loss that inexplicably changes us. We survive, we go on, we smile again and hopefully we honour her with our life but most motherless daughters never stop missing their mum and there are specific times that remain hard – Mother's Day is one of them.

Mother's Day can find us flooded with memories, surrounded by advertisements showing perfect families intact and happy. We are under pressure to be cheerful, especially if we are mothers ourselves. Yet all we might be feeling is sadness and a desire to avoid the day.

This Mother's Day, if you are still in the midst of the pain of losing your mum or you love someone who is, the following may help explain some of the complexity of these feelings.

### ***Mother daughter relationships are complicated***

Most people have complicated relationships with their mums and losing her can be one of the most complex losses of all – I can say this as a professional who has worked with many daughters of all ages who have been through this grief, as a mother of two girls and as a daughter who has lost her mum. Even those of us with the most beautiful relationships with their mothers would have had moments of disagreement, guilt, anger, stress about living up to her view of us; determination to separate from her and be independent; as well as moments of gratitude and love for having her. For some, their relationship with their mums may have never been easy – possibly even abusive, but even in these circumstances – the loss of the first person you may have connected with can bring about a unique pain and sadness.

### ***Grief is like a pendulum***

As motherless daughters, we move in and out of grief. We can have days that feel OK, moments where we feel grateful for who she was and we can even smile at our memories of her. Then we can have days where we are sad, angry, guilty and/or bereft. We oscillate between the pain of her loss and the meaning of her part in our life, the sadness for what is gone and the gratitude for what we still have (Stroebe and Schut, 1999). We live with the bittersweet notion of what is meaningful and what is painful all at once. It is hard but eventually the pendulum slows and we feel more balanced again.

### ***It takes ages to even believe you have lost your mum***

Accepting what is often the most unacceptable thing – that your mum has died - can be very hard. When I say *accepting* I am not referring to feeling like it is 'right' or 'fair', I mean just *believing* it has happened. Often this may not come until sometime after the loss. If you are still startled when you remember she's not here or can't even think about her death, it is because accepting her loss takes as long as it takes for each person. Shock is one of the things that adds to the time to process the loss of a mother, and is a really useful defence mechanism that numbs us from the full force of feeling until we can begin to process what it means for our lives.

### ***What is 'normal' goes out the window when you are grieving for your mother***

The fact is that the loss of your mum can feel overwhelming for a long time. The only real time to be concerned about someone's behaviour after such a loss is if their grief is preventing them from

managing their life or they are hurting themselves or others. If someone has lost their mum and months later they are sleeping with an item of her clothing, if they buy her a gift for her birthday, if they talk to her in their mind, if they go to call her on the phone or if they think they see her in the street, let them – they will stop when they need to and this is part of the acceptance process.

### ***You don't have to say 'goodbye'***

Some people think that a person is not coping with their loss until they are able to 'say goodbye' to the person who has died. The process of grief is not about 'letting go' of the person we have lost (impossible when the relationship was so central to us) but including them in our life in a different or new way (White, 1988). Most of us never want to live without our mum – even if we are adults ourselves – she has always been a part of us and she always will be. Not having her physical presence can be heartbreaking but if we are able to include who she was into our present life, it can fill some of that gap that her death has left.

### ***Take care***

This Mother's Day prepare for the pendulum that being a motherless daughter is. Accept that you may feel sad and grateful and loved and alone all at once. Make time to honour your mum in your own way - visit her grave, light a candle, share some stories. Also allow yourself to celebrate the fact that you had your mother, that you have managed another milestone in your grief and your unique role of being a daughter. Pace yourself through the day. Share with your loved ones how it is for you and accept their love and concern.

Being a motherless daughter is a heavy label to bear but owning it, incorporating it into who we are and continuing on in spite of it is a unique strength for which we should be proud.

If you are feeling that the pain of your loss is so acute that you are really struggling, and it may be that Mother's Day brings this to a head, ask for help.

Give yourself permission to be cared for and acknowledge that losing a mum is a grief like no other.

*Dr Lethborg has been an oncology social worker for over 30 years, holds a PhD in Psycho-oncology and continues to work for the Breast Cancer Network Australia as a specialist counsellor. She is currently the Manager, Inclusive Health Research, St Vincent's Health Australia. She was her mother's carer for the last four years of her life and lost her in June 2018. She is also the proud mother of two daughters, Grace and Ella.*

### **References**

Stroebe, M, Schut, H. (1999). The dual process model of coping with bereavement: rationale and description. *Death Studies*, 23(3), 197-224.

White M, (1988) Saying Hello Again: The Incorporation of the Lost Relationship in the Resolution of Grief, *Dulwich Centre Newsletter*, 2, 29-36.