

## LOSING YOUR MOTHER OR FATHER DURING YOUR CHILDHOOD

*Intimate attachments to other human beings are the hub around which a person's life revolves, not only when he is an infant or a toddler or a schoolchild but through his adolescence and his years of maturity as well, and into old age.<sup>7</sup>*

**Jana: When our second parent dies, we probably all feel like orphans, no matter our age when it happens. It is tough to lose a parent at any point in our life. How tough it must be for children. This hits close to home for both of us!**

Violeta: Oh yes, it hits very close to home, and I wish so badly it didn't have to be this way. As a helpless and vulnerable child, you need adults for your survival, and you are thus overwhelmed by severe cases of anxiety even if you simply perceive the threat of loss of such an important person in your life as your parent.

When, however, a child experiences actual parental loss and cannot *bring them back to life*, they experience extreme stress and distress. Children who experience parental loss urgently require support, help, an empathic response, proximity, and comfort from other adults in their life.

The age when a child is affected by such severe loss as the loss of a parent plays an extremely important role. It is also relevant whether they have lost their mother or father. The loss of the mother causes even greater distress than the loss of the father. Researchers of developmental psychology and the founders of the Attachment Theory, John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, have contributed greatly to a better understanding of the effects of discontinued most important relationships during your childhood.

**Jana: You definitely know when you are attached to someone. Could you describe it? Probably with great difficulty, but I am interested in the expert definition of attachment.**

Violeta: Attachment in children means that a newborn child is biologically and naturally programmed to seek proximity with caregivers. Attachment is a way of establishing contact with your loved ones. It is developed during the first three years of our life when the child learns of specific types of relationships. Relationship patterns with the primary caregivers are internalised. Both authors call them internal working models (IWM) that serve as the basis for experiencing oneself in a relationship towards others and are, as a rule, stable.

There are two basic types of attachment: safe and unsafe attachment, both of which include various types of behaviours. The basis of survival is the ability of the child to recognise what is safe and unsafe for survival on the planet and in inter-human interactions.

Safe attachment promotes psychological stability in children. Types of attachment are preserved during your

adulthood. Throughout all your life, in particular when you experience stress or distress, you seek a safe haven, solace, advice and a source of power from your attachment figures. Parental loss, which marks the discontinuation of attachment, puts the child at a high risk during the later periods of their life and can adversely impact the already established form of attachment to important figures in their life.

When small children realise that a parent has merely left the room, they start to protest. They start to cry vigorously and, for a while, they call upon the parent to return. Even if the parent merely leaves the room, the child experiences extreme distress. If they fail to bring the parent back to the room, they experience sadness, and, ultimately, sorrow, apathy, fatigue, and stop wailing in their feeling of despair. However, they continue to expect the parent to return and to comfort them. If children are left alone for too long, they finally give in and stop expecting comfort and solace.

If their parents fail to respond to their pleas, they need to resort to self-comfort that leads to extreme physical stress. On a subconscious level, children feel that their parents are not fully present, that they do not respond to them and that they see their distress as either overwhelming or irrelevant. Rejected children are thus unable to express their sadness and distress, which is extremely painful and discouraging. They learn how to suppress these feelings as deep as they possibly can and forget about them. Such calls to parents in vain mark one of the main risk factors for the development of various types of psychological problems.

The death of a mother or father during childhood as a critical developmental period discontinues the natural flow

of life and hurts the child deeply. Parental loss in childhood is a severe traumatic experience. Such a loss proves even more overwhelming for the child if it is due to a sudden illness, accident, suicide or other causes. The child thus loses one of their parents, a person they were attached to, one of the two most important people in their life. They experience the loss of one of their caregivers and protectors during the most vulnerable period of their life when this person is needed the most. As previously mentioned, childhood marks a decisive period of development in human life and unresolved and unreleased trauma can have extreme adverse effects on all your levels of development.

Numerous studies have shown and confirmed that people who lost a parent during their childhood or teenage years are, as a rule, at a greater risk than people who lost their parent at a later point in their life. Some studies have also demonstrated a higher likelihood of suicide in persons who experienced parental loss in their childhood.

The pain that accompanies the sudden discontinuation of the attachment between a child and their parent is so severe that it triggers internal defence mechanisms that serve to protect the child. Even though they are vital for the child's survival, they also prevent the child from grieving and accepting the loss and the change that came into their life. The younger the child when they experience parental loss, the more adverse effects this can lead to. Defence mechanisms follow the child like a shadow and can significantly compromise one's life if they are not resolved and released at a later point in life.

*I cannot recall ever (at least during a period of 10 years) discussing my father's death with my mother, ever crying with her over our joint loss. Ever grieving him. I guess staying silent was the only thing we were able to do.*

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*During the first year following my mother's death, I had not only lost my mother but my family as a whole. I hardly recall my father during those times. The only thing I remember is that he kept insisting how he had to work all day long. Even though an alcohol-addicted nanny took care of me, I spent all my days wandering around, looking for warmth in other people's homes. I remember being received well by the mothers of my playmates. Nevertheless, the nagging feeling that I was different, that I did not have a mother, remained. My father never discussed my mother, never told me what she was like when she was still alive, never reminisced about her, until shortly before his own death, when he was 96 years old.*

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So many children are bereft of adult support and words and, in most cases, it takes them years and years to be able to re-experience all the pain, process it and grieve it. Too many people, however, never get in touch with their pain of experiencing the death of one or both parents as children

throughout their life. According to some studies, silence marks the main risk factor for post-traumatic disorders in child survivors of parental suicide.

**Jana: Do you believe that being a suicide survivor can overwhelm the child even further? Are they more at risk?**

Violeta: Are you referring to my personal experience or the experiences of my clients? Everyone who has ever told me of their experiences felt similar things that I did. We all froze in horror, deprived of words. We were scared to death. We felt extremely helpless, betrayed, shamed, depreciated, abandoned. All adults who manage to speak up later in life describe the traumatic experience in their childhood as an extremely intrusive interference of violence, evil, and death in their delicate and innocent world of a child. Now that I have the words that describe my past distress, it could be summarised as follows: I felt like *darkness* had lashed out at me and knocked me to the ground.

When a parent commits suicide, they commit an act of self-violence, and, as such, also expose the child to violence and turn them into a victim of the self-violence perpetrated by the parent. Violence is characterised by a depreciating, humiliating and shaming effect. Helpless victims fall silent! Suicide causes a severe shock to the person and renders both adult and child suicide survivors at a loss for words. The age of the child is also of relevance. Early childhood marks the most vulnerable period of our life for traumatic events.

Parental suicide marks a severe traumatic experience

that proves far too overwhelming for the child's natural abilities to face it, in particular, if the child witnesses the suicide or discovers the corpse of their parent. In either of these cases, children are extremely roughly and vividly exposed to the sensory reality of this traumatic event. Children simply need to be protected from the disastrous experience and an unbearable emotional response by our most basic defence mechanisms that safeguard survival. Exceptional defence mechanisms help children overcome the most critical periods of their life, while they are waiting for a safe haven, a time or a person who will be able to provide the help they need until all associated mental and physical changes are gone.

If, however, children do not receive the support and help they need and are left to their own devices in their helplessness and horror, if they do not get the chance to put their feelings into words and to share with others what they are experiencing, what kind of pain they are experiencing, in what areas are they in dire need of assistance, then children are subjected to a great injustice. If children are not given the chance to calm down and to return to a normal state of mind, the effects of the experienced trauma are consolidated within. Such children become caught in the shackles of trauma and start experiencing sudden symptoms, resulting from the traumatic response to the traumatic event, that the two of us have already discussed in prior chapters.

**Jana: My dearest Violeta, can you tell me what did you as a child survivor of parental suicide miss the most? What was the hardest cross to bear?**

Violeta: This is why I am writing this book! Parental suicide has a tough impact on all child suicide survivors. Children simply fall silent! My personal and counselling experiences have confirmed to me that only few adults are able to see and hear distress experienced by children and provide them with the chance to put their experiences and feelings into words. However, it needs to be noted that experiences in children vary and, as a result, the effects of traumatic events differ as well. The age and gender of the child in addition to the support provided (if any) and many other factors also play a significant role.

When a child becomes a suicide survivor, special attention needs to be paid to three periods of time that can be extremely painful and stressful for the child: the pre-suicide period, the critical period during the traumatic event, and the post-suicide period.

All three can impact children in various adverse ways because their basic needs are not met and their development has been put to a halt. The suicide of a parent is always a reflection of the major personal distress of both the parent and the family as a whole that most likely originated during a lengthy period prior to the suicide and had an impact on the child. The child may also have experienced a failed suicide attempt of one of their parents.

Suicide is that final act, that turning point that makes the outside world aware of the suffering of the family and of the child, in particular.

The post-suicide period is a period characterised by new distress and post-traumatic disorders caused by the traumatic event. Especially if the affected child is left isolated, helpless and silent! Just like I was!

*I could not shake off the feeling that people had no clue how to act around me. I can still vividly recall one of my teachers who once, without a single ounce of compassion, started enquiring in front of the entire class why my father had committed suicide.*

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*It took me decades to tell anyone how my father had actually passed. Whenever someone asked me how he died, I replied that he had succumbed to an illness. It was easier that way because I did not want to witness the reaction of the other person to the truth. Above all, I feared pity.*

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*The great level of exposure caused by my father's death felt like the heaviest cross that I had to bear. I was namely the only child in the class without one parent. Our distress had opened our family to the outer world, making me feel that everyone was discussing us. I experienced other children's families as normal and my own as abnormal. I felt so deeply ashamed. It caused me immense distress to see how my father's suicide had brought our pain into the open for the entire world to see.*

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*After my father's death, our family became extremely isolated. It was hard to observe how our interactions with relatives started to wear off and*

*change. I missed my father's relatives. I missed their support. I wanted to discuss my father with them. I wanted them to visit us, to hang out. It hurt so much to see them blaming my mother for my father's death.*

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Not many studies have been conducted so far on a global scale on the effect of parental suicide on the child and on its other repercussions. Those scientists, who have decided to examine this issue further, have found that the silence that children in such situations must face continues to cause an overwhelming sense of pain.

It has been found that children, who lost their parent before they turned 13, are highly likely to attempt or commit suicide, or to experience other mental disorders. Studies have also shown that children and teenagers who have lost their mother to suicide are even more likely to try to commit suicide themselves.<sup>8</sup>

My counselling experiences continue to show me that the effects of parental suicide in childhood, when the child was pushed into suffering, helpless and without words, are indicated during childhood, teenage years and adulthood by the following: negative self-image, mistrust, low self-esteem, shutting oneself off, feelings of deep shame and fear, anxiety, in addition to extreme helplessness, self-destructive behaviour, isolation, various medical conditions.

**Jana: How painful! If you are compassionate, you know that both the child and the rest of the family, suicide survivors, are entitled to receive all the support and help that they need. The deceased is not the only victim, their entire family also is.**

Violeta: How true! If you are compassionate and empathic, you are able to realise that families who are able to gather enough inner strength to face such a severe distress all alone are an exception to the rule. Too often, the situation proves overwhelming. They simply cannot do it. They simply give up. My family also gave up.

Many families need help from outside sources because the trauma caused by parental suicide also adversely affects the surviving parent. Can this parent in their extreme pain and hurt support the child? Probably with great difficulty. Unfortunately, too many families of suicide survivors also need to protect themselves from the environment that tends to stigmatise suicide by denying the cause of death or consciously omitting any information that could suggest suicide in the family.

One of the most painful experiences a child suicide survivor can experience is the air of mystery and silence that envelops the family, as if the deceased had never existed and had never been one of the most important people in their life. Any mentions of the deceased are simply left out of conversations.

Jana, can you imagine the sheer suffering and confusion experienced by the child? How a child, who is allowed to words, to memories, to beautiful memories, to pride and

to the truth, is pushed into major distress, confusion and abnormal attitude towards themselves, other people and the world, by this silence?

Parental suicide frequently marks the point, in which the trauma is integrated and passed on to the next generation.