

# The New York Life Foundation's Bereavement Survey:

## Key Findings

In our 2017 Bereavement Survey—the latest in a series of polling initiatives on grieving children and their families—we polled 1,004 Americans and 587 Millennials/Gen Xers who had lost a parent before age 20. The survey was conducted by Pollara Strategic Insights.



## IMPACT, SCOPE, AND SUPPORT OF LOSS

### Americans Who Lost a Parent Growing Up Attest to the Long-Term Nature of Grief—Yet Support From Family, Friends Wanes Within Three Months

- When asked how long it took before they could be happy again/move forward, the mean time among those who lost a parent growing up was 6+ years, and the most common response was “I’ve never been okay with my loss” (30%)
- But, over half (57%) reported that, following the loss, support from family and friends tapered off within the first 3 months; 20% say support tapered off after the first week and 21% say after the first month
- Top misperceptions about grief identified by those who lost a parent growing up include “Just because you seem okay on the outside means you must be fine on the inside” (50%), “You will eventually get over the loss” (42%), and “Feelings of grief continue to get better over time” (31%)

### LOSING A PARENT GROWING UP HAS A PROFOUND AND ENDURING IMPACT

- Nearly 80% of those who lost a parent growing up agree that losing a parent was the hardest thing they have ever had to face; 77% agree that they will always feel like a part of them is missing and 78% agree that they still think about their departed parent every day
- 72% say that they didn’t know how to talk about what they were going through and 65% agree that after their parent died, they felt like there was no one they could talk to

- 59% of griever say they have experienced more feelings of sadness or depression in their life compared to most adults
- Yet most bereaved children demonstrate resiliency: nearly four in five (79%) of those who lost a parent before age 20 felt that they had been able to move forward well after the death of their parent, and 68% felt that experiencing that loss made them better prepared to handle other adverse circumstances in their life

### FOR THOSE LOOKING TO OFFER SUPPORT TO GRIEVING FAMILIES, SIMPLEST ACTS OFTEN THE MOST POWERFUL

- Those who lost a parent growing up identified the most helpful things family and friends said or did after their loss as simple gestures like sharing stories about their loved one (37%, highest cited), remembering important dates like birthdays and death anniversaries (26%), spending holiday time with them (24%), and continuing to ask how they were doing well after the loss (23%)
- At the same time, the second most cited helpful action was to engage with them in the same manner as they did before their loss (31%)



## PUBLIC AWARENESS AND RESOURCES

### Public Dialogue About Death Is on the Rise, Yet Discomfort and Avoidance Persists

- A full 70% of Americans believe that today people are more open about issues of death and dying than they were 5-10 years ago
- 50% believe that social media has helped to open the dialogue about death and loss
- At the same time, 60% of Americans believe that grief is a private matter and 45% acknowledge that thinking and talking about death makes them uncomfortable
- Well over half (63%) of Americans say they have sometimes avoided talking to someone about their loss because they were worried they'd say the wrong thing; over half (56%) of those who lost a parent growing up say that their peers didn't know how to act around them after the loss
- Among those who lost a parent growing up, 68% say that it would have been easier to cope with their grief if our society was more open to talking about death and loss
- 85% of Americans affirm that there is a lot more we can all do to better support kids who lose a loved one growing up



### MOST AMERICANS HAVE DEALT PERSONALLY WITH GRIEF, BUT DON'T KNOW WHERE TO TURN FOR HELP

- 80% of Americans have experienced the loss of a close friend or relative that has had a profound impact on them – however, only 46% indicate that they would know where in their community to turn for help if they suffered a loss
- 54% of those who lost a parent growing up say they struggled to find grief resources after the loss of their parent



### ROOM FOR TEACHERS, SCHOOL COMMUNITIES TO OFFER MORE SUPPORT FOR GRIEVING STUDENTS

- Only 25% of those who had lost a parent growing up said that their school was well prepared to help them when they returned to the classroom; only 31% indicated that a teacher/administrator/counselor sought them out to offer help
- 75% of Americans agree that schools have a pivotal role to play in supporting grieving students and 81% affirm that schools should be better prepared with resources to support grieving students



## BEREAVEMENT AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

### As the Loss of a Parent Forever Changes the Family Dynamic, Many Point to Need for More Family Resources and Support

- 71% of those who lost a parent growing up wish that there had been more resources available to help their surviving parent cope with his/her grief
- 62% say it was hard to balance the needs of their surviving parent with their own grief process, 68% worried a lot that something might happen to their surviving parent, and 47% said that the struggles of their surviving parent to cope with the loss had a negative impact on them
- And while many say that the loss brought them closer to their surviving parent and siblings, 62% say they wish their immediate family had done more to help them following the death of their parent (cited highest among all groups)



### Experiencing Childhood Loss Impacts Parenting, Legacy Considerations

- 71% of those who lost a parent growing up feel that the early death of their parent affected or affects the way they parent their own child(ren)
- 72% said that losing their parent had helped them become a better parent overall, including conveying to their child(ren) the importance of never taking anyone for granted (86%) and developing more family traditions with their child(ren) (78%)
- 75% said their loss made them more concerned about making sure their own family would be cared for if something were to happen to them, and 78% said their loss prompted them to make a greater effort to document/record family memories for their own child(ren)
- Loss has an intergenerational impact: 79% said when they became a parent, they really missed having the perspective/guidance of their deceased parent and 85% wish that they could talk to their departed parent about their life as an adult



## BEREAVEMENT AND FINANCES

### Most Americans Haven't Taken Steps to Prepare for a Loss

- Only a minority of Americans have taken concrete steps to prepare for their death, including purchasing life insurance (43%), discussing last wishes with family members (43%), preparing a will (33%), establishing a health care directive (17%), preparing or revising a financial plan (13%), and designating guardians for their children (10%)
- Americans cite stress, confusion, procrastination around end-of-life planning: 56% of Americans say they feel stressed out when they think about it; 65% say it's hard to know whom to trust when you're faced with big end-of-life financial planning decisions; and 68% think that planning now in the event of their death is a good idea; they just haven't done it
- Among those who lost a parent growing up, 69% agree that losing a parent made them more aware of the importance of protecting their family's finances and 47% agree that losing a parent prompted them to take steps to be better prepared financially for their own death