

The New York Life Foundation's 2017 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.

1) 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%)
- Top misperceptions about grief identified by those who lost a parent growing up focus on grief’s persistence for the long term, including “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%)
- But alarmingly, 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

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
- Many feel isolated after the loss: 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
- Compared to most adults, 59% of grievers say they have experienced more feelings of sadness or depression in their life
- Yet most bereaved children demonstrate resiliency in the face of loss: 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%), 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%) – indicating a desire for normalcy

2) 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
- Americans overwhelmingly see a need for more support around the issue, with 85% affirming 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
- Those who lost a parent growing up report a lack of community understanding and resources: 54% 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
- Americans believe that schools should offer more help, with 75% agreeing that schools have a pivotal role to play in supporting grieving students and 81% affirming that schools should be better prepared with resources to support grieving students

3) TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL MEDIA

While Majority of Americans Have Used Social Media to Express Condolences, Actions Still Speak Louder Than "Likes"

- 52% of Americans say they have used social media to share thoughts about someone who has passed away, and 58% say that social media has enabled them to reach out to people they otherwise wouldn't have to express condolences about the loss of a loved one
- But personal communication still matters: 41% who lost a parent growing up prefer for friends to reach out in person or over the phone rather than online
- An opportunity for more support online: only 26% have used social media to connect with other grieving individuals, and only 14% have participated in an online grief community

4) 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
- The struggle to balance the needs of different family members can be a challenge: 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

- A strong majority (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)
- A full 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%)
- Many also suggest that the loss made them more deliberate about preserving family memories and assets: 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

5) 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%), designating guardians for their children (10%); those who lost a parent growing up are even less likely to have participated in these activities with the exception of designating a guardian for their children (17%)
- 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; 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

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