

When Grief Darkens Father's Day

When grief darkens Father's Day: Tips for coping and honoring dad

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As Father's Day approaches, not everyone is wondering about whether to get Dad a goofy tie or a fishing lure. Many are wondering how they will get through the day as they mourn for the loss of their father.

The day can be challenging for grieving sons and daughters, but there are ways to cope, says Karen Monts, director of grief support services for Hospice of Michigan. "Remember, the anticipation can be worse than the actual day," she said. "The best way to handle that is to turn the tables and say, 'Yes, the day is coming.' And then start planning."

Planning might involve discussions with other family members to come up with activities to honor and remember Dad. That might involve going to church, visiting the cemetery, having a dinner that was special to him, or going to a favorite spot.

Grief on Father's Day sometimes catches people by surprise, particularly because Mother's Day tends to grab much of the holiday glory, said Monts, who is based at the Hospice Southeast Michigan office.

"We can be very surprised that Father's Day can be just as challenging and get surprised by our emotions," she said. "Don't be surprised if that day brings tears, if the emotions well up again."

The best approach to take will vary depending on age and circumstances. Monts suggested several tips to consider in preparation for the holiday on the third Sunday in June.

Honor Dad's Memory.

Focusing on Dad's life and what he means to you can bring up good memories. Do a favorite activity, visit a favorite spot or eat a special meal.

Monts said one young woman used to watch old Westerns on TV with her father, so watching a movie brings back memories of good times together.

Adopt-a-Father Day.

Find another father - or several fathers - to honor. Reaching out and caring for others can ease the grief.

"Maybe this is a time to go and get some nice socks and a nice handkerchief and just individually wrap them up and check with a nursing home and say you would like to deliver them to the men there," Monts said.

She did that on Christmas Eve and was touched by the reaction of the residents.

Ask for Help

Accept an invitation to celebrate with another family. Ask a friend to come over. Let loved ones know you could use some support.

"That might take some effort, and sometimes it takes a little humbling of ourselves to be able to ask for that support or that company," Monts said. "But people care about us. Let those needs be made known."

Some may prefer to spend the day by themselves, but even in those cases, Monts suggests making a plan, rather than spending the day in bed.

"I think the most important thing to do is to think about ways to celebrate the life of your parents, not their death," she said.

Looking Ahead

Some people say the first Father's Day without a dad is the most difficult. Others find the second is, because by then, the reality of the loss has set in, Monts said.

In time, working to make the day "something that is a little more positive" will pay off, she said.

"If you do work and hold on to hope, I think you will find Father's Day will get a lot easier," she said. "It will take effort, but it is definitely doable."

A Self-Care Day

Get a massage or pedicure. Have a nice dinner with friends. Take a mini-vacation.

In grief, people often forget to take care of themselves, Monts said, so a day of self-care can be a big mood brightener.

Helping Children Through the Day

If there are young children, involve them in planning for the holiday. Ask if there are special activities they want to do to honor their dad.

Recently on Mother's Day, Monts said her niece helped a cousin create a scrapbook in memory of her mother. The hours spent compiling pictures and cutting words from magazines became a fun time connecting mother and child.

Some families opt for a change in scenery. Monts knows one that took a European vacation. For many families, a trip closer to home or a mini-vacation might be more realistic.

The day can be especially difficult for mothers who are grieving for their husbands while also caring for children grieving for Dad.

"The parent can model for that child," Monts said. "If the child is upset, Mother may say, 'I get upset, too. I may cry on that day, too. But we are going to do something together to help us get through that day.'"