

Daughters grieving for their mothers

Pat Zaitschek, BA, Dip Ed, Dip Counselling

Counsellor and Retired Lecturer, Cruse Bereavement Care, Reading, UK

As counsellors working for the British charity Cruse Bereavement Care in Reading, we noticed that an increasing number of women mourning their mothers were seeking help. It seemed that many of these clients were mature and apparently self-reliant people and yet they experienced what we felt to be exceptional distress.

THREE GROUPS OF WOMEN

We decided to make a study of these cases, taking care to preserve the anonymity of clients. Counsellors wrote up cases in response to a questionnaire about family background and relationships and other relevant information. We found that all clients dwelt much upon their family circumstances of both the past and present. They presented not only guilt, anxiety and anger, but also acute depression, psychosomatic illness and inability to work, even where their mothers had died of old age.

The 33 cases studied fell into three groups. The smallest and saddest group was of seven women whose childhoods had been hard and unhappy. Their mothers had been the dominant parents but had been unable to feel or demonstrate affection for their children; fathers had been mostly absent. The daughters had grown up (all well into middle age) without experience of love and so without self-esteem. Emotional confusion, alcoholism and erratic lifestyles made appointments difficult and often these clients could not face the need to look into themselves. Counsellors could make little progress with them.

A second group of nine clients proved far more responsive. These were women who had enjoyed good family relationships with affection shared between father and mother, but with no undue dependency on mother's support. Their deep grief seemed to be in part the result of complications in their present circumstances, such as ill-health or other recent losses. All of them adjusted to their loss within reasonable time and found their grief subsiding, finding support not only in counselling but

EDITOR'S NOTE

In this paper, Pat Zaitschek gives an account of the special characteristics and reactions of 33 British women who sought help from Cruse Bereavement Care after the death of a mother.

within their own stable families.

For counsellors, the third group of 17 proved the most rewarding. All these clients proved to have been very close to their mothers with deeply loving and dependent (in different ways) feelings for them. In all but three cases, this relationship had developed in part as a result of the father's absence through early death, divorce, work abroad or through his cold and distant nature. Extreme terms were used to describe the relationship with mother and the most acute bereavement problems were suffered by these clients.

This closeness to mother (and lack of father) had clearly bred problems for the siblings of the client who experienced jealousy, emotional conflict and lack of affection for the favoured sister. The more mature of the clients had sometimes been eldest children who had early taken responsibility in the home and who after mother's death continued (for a time at least) to feel responsible for siblings, perhaps adopting mother's role. Preoccupation with mother seemed in some cases to have affected marital relationships and the number of children born to these women was small.

Three clients in this group had had very loving relationships with both parents and with siblings, but still suffered deeply from the mother's death, even though their life-styles suggested independence and self-realisation. But even in these cases, as in all the others, counsellors reported dramatic changes taking place:

greater self-knowledge and maturity, a sense of freedom and release, full recovery from depression and ill-health, better communication with partners and others, new interests and a more positive view of the future. It would seem that affection had engendered the capacity for growth which separation from mother then made possible.

COUNSELLORS AS MOTHER-FIGURES

Our optimism for these clients can only be tentative without careful follow-up over several years (which we do not intend to undertake). But counsellors felt they had acted as temporary mother-figures while the final separation from the real mother was negotiated. Where counselling took place over a long period (not often required), care was taken to avoid encouraging dependency. Imagination and insight were needed into circumstances which differed widely in detail. We warned ourselves not to take too seriously the generalisations about our clients. But we felt encouraged that these 'daughters' with much active life before them could be helped to develop their potential.

This study was made in the spring of 1993. Since then we have found that nearly one third of clients are adults bereaved of parents and many of these cases show the same trends as those we reported here.

AFTER THE DEATH OF A PARENT by Caroline Morcom £2.95 plus £1 p&p*

A helpful booklet for adults who lose a parent, which explores the often complex feelings that arise. Written by an experienced bereavement counsellor.

*Available only from Cruse Bereavement Care, 126 Sheen Road, Richmond, Surrey TW9 1UR. Overseas customers please enquire about rates.