

when a parent dies

HOW TO COPE WITH A LOSS WHEN PLANNING YOUR WEDDING

BY MEREDITH GORDON RESNICK

a few months before my wedding I was standing in my parents' bedroom, when I burst into tears. Across the room my mother stood by, helplessly searching for soothing words. But she started to cry, too.

"Dad would know what to say," she said. "I wish he were here."

So did I. Although my father had died a year before, the combination of losing him and planning a wedding left me raw. It required that I be patient with myself and honest about how cheated I felt at not having him to walk me down the aisle.

a change of heart

Feeling downhearted and depressed is common, of course, whenever a parent dies. But when it occurs close to a wedding, the loss can be especially hard to deal with, says Judy Axonovitz, a clinical social worker and instructor at the USC School of Social Work in Los Angeles.

"The bride is looking forward to planning the future with her new partner, when all of a sudden this wonderfully happy event is interrupted by grief and mourning," she explains. "It may be especially hard to acknowledge feelings of sadness at a time when you were expecting to feel elation and joy."

words of comfort

In the desire to be supportive, wedding guests may ask questions about your recent loss that may seem awkward or out of place. The solution: Prepare a short answer that expresses your feelings and doesn't encourage a lengthy discussion. For example: "Thanks for coming and being with us today. I know my mother [or father] is here in spirit. Your presence and support mean so much to all of us."

forging ahead

Amber Consulo, 28, of Roseville, California, was planning a church wedding several months into the future when it became

clear that her gravely ill father wouldn't live long enough to attend.

So she and her fiancé held an immediate civil ceremony. After her father's death, she continued preparing for the church wedding, but, she says, the stress left her numb.

"We were trying to grieve and make wedding plans at the same time—it was a weird combination."

Six months before her wedding, Cristina

Moska, 30, of Maywood, New Jersey, was also in the midst of preparations when her father died suddenly. "If it had been just a month or two before, it would have been very difficult for me to continue making plans," she admits.

Even though she had time to grieve, says Cristina, "I still couldn't believe it was happening to me."

Should you go ahead with the wedding or postpone it? For most, the best choice is to modify the original plans. Depending on when the death occurred, a couple may feel it's not appropriate to have a big, formal party; instead, they might plan a small ceremony and dinner for close family and friends, and a more festive celebration six months later.

While a wedding shouldn't evolve into a memorial service, you

will probably want to honor the deceased parent during the ceremony or reception. Some ideas: Place a solitary candle at the altar or put a floral arrangement near where

the vows will be recited. Ask a close friend or relative to read a poem or religious verse, or have the officiant invoke the deceased's name during the service.

If you're worried about how your mom or dad will react on your wedding day, have a sibling or other relative standing by with support and a hug.

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letting it out

While there is no "right" way to mourn, healthy grief begins with acknowledging feelings and sharing them with someone you trust, says Tian Dayton, a clinical psychologist in New York City and author of *Heartworks* (Health Communications, Fall, 1997), a book about how trauma and grief affect relationships. But because weddings are emotional events to begin with, some women try to put off grief until the party's over. Unfortunately, it doesn't work.

Dayton says it's best to acknowledge feelings, without judging them as good or bad. Bottling hurt, anger, sadness, even relief—especially after a long illness—may cause problems in your relationship. On the other hand, it's great to be honest with your fiancé, but don't make him your only confidant. Talk to friends and family members as well, or join a support group to help cope with your grief.