Dear Alice,

My father left my mother before I was born. They had a good relationship and were happy, but then my mom became pregnant with me. She had trouble telling my father, who was only eighteen at the time, and said she didn't expect him to play a role in my life. So, he left.

I've never seen him or spoken to him in my life. I have no idea what he looks like or who he is and he seems to have no desire to have anything at all to do with me. In fact, he ditched town the day after he found out. I'm mad... I'm mad at my mother for making it so easy for him to leave and I hate that man for what he did. I'm still young and even I can't imagine deserting a child and leaving them without a parent for their entire life. But then maybe that's because I know how it feels and I would never put anyone through that kind of pain. As a girl, I suppose it's hard to understand. Perhaps you can help me to understand his reasoning?

Answer

Dear Reader,

While your father may have left for a variety of reasons, it may not be possible for you (or anyone for that matter) to fully understand his reasons and the context in which he left. With that being said, as you grow older and have more life experiences of your own, you may develop a better understanding about the circumstances surrounding your father's departure. What IS possible and what may prove helpful to you right now, is developing a better understanding about how his leaving has affected you. By doing this, you may find yourself at a more peaceful place.

When a parent leaves with so many unanswered questions those who are left behind may feel a range of emotions everything from sadness, to grief, to anger, and back again. It's understandable that you have feelings of anger towards both your mother and father. Anger is a normal human emotion which can have negative or positive consequences. On the one hand, experiencing anger can act as a helpful signal letting a person know that s/he is hurting inside. Anger can also act as a motivation, enticing a person to place her/his energy on healing. On the other hand, holding on to anger can have real, long-term physical and emotional consequences.

It may be helpful to ask yourself some thoughtful questions in order to better gauge how this important issue is impacting your life:
Have you always felt anger toward your father for leaving, and mother for letting him leave? Do these feelings intensify at certain times (i.e., holidays, weekends, family events)?

- Have your feelings affected your ability to form friendships and/or relationships?
- Do you blame yourself for your father’s abandonment? Has your father contacted you lately? Have you ever tried to contact him? If so, what was his response?

Feel free to jot the answers to these questions in a journal. By practicing self-reflection, you can start processing your feelings and moving beyond them. You also may find it helpful to explore these questions and seek support with a trusted loved one and/or a counselor. Sometimes, the simple act of talking about our feelings helps us to understand them better and to look at the situation differently. In the meantime and in order to cope with your feelings, it may be helpful to practice some of the strategies below:

- Write a letter to your father (no need to send it) to express your emotions and ask questions that you have wanted to ask him.
- Keep a journal where you write down what you are feeling, be it anger, sadness, or hurt. This may help you identify triggers of events that make you feel especially angry and/or hurt.
- Avoid alcohol and drugs as these can exasperate the ill feelings you are experiencing now.
- Reach out to others in your community by volunteering and/or mentoring others (e.g., Big Buddy programs).
- Participate in activities that you enjoy and that help you relax (e.g., walking, yoga, meditation, listening to music, etc.).
- Talk about your feelings with family, friends, and/or counseling professionals

List adapted from Anger Management [2] from Villanova University.

If you think you may find it beneficial to speak with a counselor/psychologist about this issue, you can talk to your health care provider about options. Your local YM/YWCA may also have groups where you can share your feelings with other people who have gone through similar situations. While you may not be able to fully get to the bottom of why your father left, you can certainly look within ? and reach out to others ? to begin the healing process.

Alice!

Category:
- Emotional Health [3]
- Grief & loss [4]

Related questions

- How long does mourning last? [5]
- Grieving a parent’s death [6]
- Anger management group therapy? [7]
- To get help, or not to get help? Help! [8]

Resources

Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [9]
Mental Health Service (CUMC) [10]

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