Dear Alice,

I'm sorta new at this, but I'll give it a shot anyway. My dad died of a massive heart attack just over a year ago. I went through a pretty rough mourning period, but it didn't seem to last very long. My mom is still very much in mourning to this day. I guess my question is: How can you tell if you've mourned enough? And how can you tell if you're avoiding it?

They say the worst is over when the pain stops and the good memories start. But how do I know I didn't just skip to the good memories?

? Distressed Lion

Answer

Dear Distressed Lion,

Condolences to you and your mother. It sounds like you are both dealing with some hefty emotions, and since there is no formula for grief and mourning, you are likely dealing with them somewhat differently. Each person does it at her/his own pace. There is no designated 'healthy' period of mourning with a defined start, or an abrupt end. There are different stages of grief and everyone moves through them differently. Good memories and sad moments will be with you throughout your life as you think of your dad. Sometimes, the anniversary of your dad's death, birthdays, holidays, a favorite song or food, and/or someone's smell will be reminders of your loss. And, at other times, these events will evoke warm, loving, tender, and even joyous feelings.

Obviously, your mourning is different from your mother's? your relationship with your dad was different, and you're a different person from your mother. Your mom lost her partner, and her entire daily life may have changed.
After a year, however, it may be your mother who needs some help with her mourning, not you. Perhaps, the two of you could read some books about grief and loss? for you, it's to see how well you've coped to better understand your mother; and, for your mother, it's to help her move on with her life? a challenging step. Lynn Caine's book Being a Widow is a good read, as is Harold S. Kushner's When Bad Things Happen to Good People. Maybe your mother has a close friend you could talk with. Or a clergy person could visit her, assess where she is, and make a recommendation for her to see a grief counselor or participate in a loss group. Sometimes, these are even available at a neighborhood YM/YWCA.

Your grief and ability to move on are evidence of your strength. Hopefully, your mother will get strength from you as well.

Best through your healing and mourning,

Alice!

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Resources

Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside)
Mental Health Service (CUMC)

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