

— A FRAMEWORK

The Six Pillars of Early Parent Loss.

by Hope Edelman & David Kessler

A foundation for understanding the grief that develops alongside the person carrying it.

COMPANION RESOURCE

A NOTE BEFORE WE BEGIN

Why this loss is different.

When a parent dies during childhood, the grief doesn't end when childhood does. It develops alongside the person carrying it — shaping identity, relationships, and the way someone moves through the world for decades to come.

Most people who carry this loss have never had a framework for understanding it. Most helpers who sit with them haven't either.

These six pillars are the foundation of that framework. They explain why early parent loss is different, why it stays, and why understanding it changes everything.

“Most grief models weren't built for this. These pillars are the foundation of one that is.”

— HOPE EDELMAN & DAVID KESSLER

PILLAR

01

Children grieve *differently* than adults.

What looks like play might be grief. What looks like avoidance might be grief.

When a parent dies during childhood, grief extends throughout the entire developmental arc — shifting and reshaping as a child's emotional and intellectual capacities mature. What looks like play might be grief. What looks like avoidance might be grief. For many children, growing up without their parent is simply all they have ever known.

It doesn't feel like loss. It just feels like normal. And that's exactly why it goes unrecognized for so long.

PILLAR

02

This grief doesn't have a fixed endpoint.

At milestones. In relationships. In the body. Even decades later.

Early parent loss doesn't resolve — it evolves. It keeps showing up across an entire lifetime in new and different ways. At milestones. In relationships. In the body. In ways that can feel like the loss just happened, even decades later. Understanding and self-compassion are not just helpful here — they are essential.

PILLAR

03

Gender shapes the grief in specific and important ways.

*Mother–daughter.
Mother–son.
Father–daughter.
Father–son.*

The gender of both the parent and the child creates a distinct grief experience. There are four combinations — mother/daughter, mother/son, father/daughter, father/son — and while there are similarities between them, there are also important differences. The loss of a same-sex parent, for example, carries its own set of identifications and complications that cross-gender parent loss does not. Getting this right matters.

PILLAR

04

The coping strategies children develop can outlast their usefulness.

Some adaptations may be blocking happiness or growth long after they were needed.

When a parent dies, children do what children do -- they find ways to manage. To survive. To keep going. Some of those strategies are carried right into adulthood, where they may overstay their welcome. Some may even be blocking happiness or growth. Recognizing these adaptations -- and understanding where they came from -- is one of the most important things a helper can do.

PILLAR

05

Early parent loss is an attachment trauma.

What happens after the loss can shape attachment as much as the loss itself.

This loss doesn't just affect how someone grieves. It affects how they love, how they trust, and how they let people in for the rest of their lives. We tend to connect the dots directly from the loss to later outcomes — but what happens after a parent dies can affect a child's attachment style just as much as the loss itself. The wound runs deeper than most people realize.

PILLAR

06

The story is *never fixed*.

There is always room for growth, change, and a new relationship with the loss.

The story someone has been telling themselves about this loss since childhood is not the only story. Early parent loss survivors can be helped to create new narratives -- ones that emphasize survival and empowerment while still honoring the hardships they faced. There is always room for growth, change, and a new relationship with the loss. The story can be rewritten.