

Grief Doesn't Look the Way I Thought It Would After Losing My Mother

Reflections on Grief By Charlene of the Collective ACT

Understanding Grief Through the Eyes of the Inner Child

I always imagined grief would be loud. Crying in the middle of the night. Falling apart at the grocery store. Something obvious. Something everyone could see. But when my mother passed, it wasn't loud yet more so confusing. I felt numb, then guilty for feeling numb. Some days, I feel relief. And then shame. Other days, sorrow settles in slowly, like dusk folding into the edges of the day, and I let it linger beside me.

I kept waiting for the flood of memories, the ache of missing her, the deep love that people write about. But that's not what came first. What came first was anger. Not because she was gone, but because my inner child still needed her to be the mother she never had. Growing up with an emotionally immature parent meant I became an expert at minimizing my needs. And now, without her here, my inner child lost the hope that someday she'd grow into someone who could hold them.

I grieve what never was. And she grieves what never will be. I'm learning that grief, especially in complicated relationships, doesn't follow a neat arc. It moves like fog. It hides and returns. It's not just about missing someone. Sometimes, it's about making peace with the void they left behind long before they were gone.

Having an emotionally immature parent can feel like choking on unmet expectations, and once you accept who they are, you feel like you are finally able to exhale. I no longer held my breath waiting for her to show up as the mother I had always needed. That version of grief, quiet and unmet, had been with me for years. It was tucked into the silent corners of my heart, an ache I stopped naming because it never stopped breaking me open. Yet I had survived it.

Letting go of that hope was how I learned to breathe again. It made space for a relationship with her that didn't require holding my breath, waiting for change that wasn't coming. I grieved and buried the mother I expected her to be, and thought I'd buried the grief to. I moved forward with a kind of peace that came from no longer asking her to be someone she couldn't. The relationship that followed felt more like surviving within boundaries. It was less painful, more distant, and something I could finally carry without falling apart.

Yet in the wake of her passing, something I didn't expect happened. That familiar feeling of suffocation returned. I thought I had already cried all the tears I had for her. But this was a different ache. One that wrapped around my lungs and squeezed in the quiet moments. One that whispered, your inner child still needed her, even if I told myself I didn't.

I had already done the work. But there was something buried deep inside me that my inner child still needed. She had been quiet, patient, even proud of how far we had come. But she had never stopped hoping. And now, she was heartbroken.

The ache I feel now is different from emotional abandonment. This grief carries the weight of what was never given, a prayer left unanswered, still echoing in the chambers of a child's heart that hoped her mother would one day become what she needed. It's the pain of not being mothered in the way her soul craved, mixed with the finality of knowing it will never happen. So here I am, learning how to hold two truths at once: My adult self is healing, grounded, and aware of what was never mine to carry.

My inner child is grieving, raw, and still longing to be held. Yet I'm not rushing to resolve it. Instead, I'm learning what it means to integrate. To let the grief of my inner child live in the same room as the wisdom of my adult self. To drink my chai tea in the mornings and whisper to her, You didn't imagine it. You really did need her. Grief doesn't follow a timeline. It doesn't ask for permission. It reopens things you thought were closed. And sometimes, it suffocates you all over again. But this time, I know how to breathe through it.

Take This With You

If your grief feels complicated, messy, or even invisible to others know that it's still valid. You're allowed to grieve in ways that don't look like what you see in the movies. You're allowed to feel the truth of your story.

"What resonates with you from this piece? If this stirred up something in you, take a moment to journal, breathe, or share with someone you trust. Healing starts with acknowledgment."

