



### **Linda Montfort, Caregiver for her mother 30 years ago**

My name is Linda Montfort and 30 years ago, or plus, I was 18 when my mother died of terminal ovarian cancer. I was 17 when she was diagnosed and my brother and I were living with my mother. My parents were divorced, so it was him and I who did the best we could to support her in that final year. But it was an extremely difficult year and a painful year and a lot of strong feelings certainly were present every day.

#### **Looking back**

She went through chemotherapy. She lost her hair, and...yeah, all I remember is couch and illness and lying in bed. I mean, your brain doesn't process the same, the same as a teenager right, as compared to an adult. I mean, that's all I can visualize and see. And then, the last week of her life, she went into to the hospital and didn't come out. And I think one of the things that makes me a little bit sad is that often times they recommend to have a closing conversation or... that didn't happen and so that that was hard, I think. But, at the same time, she was fighting her battle alone, and so I think she did the best she could and she was very brave through it all. I mean you couldn't ask for a better mother.

#### **Grief**

It was a completely confusing time. I mean, I think of it as like a globe on an axis without the axis. Like the earth was just spinning all over. And so I threw myself into the most mature form I could, but everything was a huge decision — do I live rural, do I live urban, do I go on and do grad studies, there was no one to talk to. And I think when you lose your best friend and your best friend is your mother and that's the first funeral you ever go to — it's grief overload. So it was a lonely and isolating time. And I think for a teenager — very few teenagers have parents who are palliative — and it's very hard on them because no matter how mature they are it's too much to cope with. And they really need to have their own place to talk and to be angry and depressed and, yeah, there's lots of guilt. I wasn't always the best kid. Like, right, you get angry when you get tired of seeing someone sick and nauseous and bile and all those horrible things and you do the best you can but there's a lot of guilt. And I had to process that too and forgive myself.

#### **Outside support**

You get support from other people but it's time-limited and they do expect you to sort of carry on. So, I think that one of my favourite gurus of grief says get support now and always. Like it's never ending when you need support. And I think that's really important to remember that. It's a life-altering experience. And any life-altering experience

requires processing, you know, on an ongoing basis. So I think I've done the work that I can and I feel as good as I can. And I've tried to reach out to people who are in the same experience. I've also come to the conclusion that if someone had said to me, 'Linda, you're doing as well as anyone could, but you know what, I'd like you to talk to someone just to make sure that's true.' That probably is the only way I might have talked to a counselor because I needed people to know I was strong and that I wasn't weak. There isn't too many people who go through what we did at that age, so I didn't want to be pitied but I would have been supported. I think we have to be fairly assertive with young people and at least try to knock at their door and say, 'You know what, don't keep it inside because one way or another, it's coming out.'

### **My mother's decision**

didn't know until the end she was actually, the very end, that she was going to die. She hadn't told us that it was terminal. And I actually am thankful for that because I think it would have been a very difficult year made more difficult. Because what do you do with that when you don't have a lot of close support around? How do you as a young adult be told your parent, your best friend, is dying? And you're supposed to process that? So I think she made the decision to let nature unfold as it should and I'm actually thankful for that. I think it was a protective factor and we had dealt with it when we needed to.

### **Just a teenager**

What does a teenager do? How do you talk about cancer? I don't know how one does that readily. People didn't do that then. I don't remember us doing a lot of support but doing the best we could. Teenagers don't, even older ones, don't know what to do. They really don't. They're... the adolescent brain, they say, doesn't stop growing till age 21. At 18 you're really still, or 17 what I was, barely, um you...it's information overload. It's not looked at like an adult would. How could we be supportive to her? What should we be doing? You're just a teenager at the end of the day.

### **Forgiveness**

I had lots of guilt, for probably two decades, and then I realized I was a 17 year old. What would one expect? So I had to forgive myself and that was fairly intentional because I did have guilt for many years. Because it's not pleasant to be around cancer all of the time. It's not an attractive disease and I think stress comes out and it's not, we're not always honorable in that experience. And why should we be? Welcome to the human race. So, yeah, forgiveness is very important and not everyone does it.

### **My comfort**

My mother died two months after my high school graduation and for my graduation she gave me a book of poetry. And after she died I didn't appreciate poetry. I think it was her way of providing healing when she knew she wouldn't be here. And in that book I found a poem called *What Is Once Loved* and it's by Elizabeth Coatsworth and it's very short. But it became a way of keeping her with me and it goes like this: "What is once loved is always yours from that day. Take it home in your heart and nothing ever can take it away." And that's it. And it's my comfort.