

CASE VIGNETTE: Carly

Carly is a 28 y.o. woman who came in for treatment at her mother's urging. Her mother has become increasingly concerned about Carly over the past few years. Carly's father died 3 years ago of colon cancer. Carly was a main support person for her father during his 8 months illness and decline. She stopped her graduate studies in History and moved home to help her mother to care for him, as the situation became too much for one person to handle.

The therapist learns that Carly grew up in a large family, where she was the youngest of five children. While she loved her siblings, as well as her mother, she was closest to her father. She felt her father was really good at listening, giving advice, and telling stories. She loved when her dad would play his old record albums and the whole family would often sing along. The therapist notices that Carly brightens up and is quite animated as she talks about her dad and how much she loved these family times. Carly and her dad shared many interests -- music, history, old movies. She loved hearing him talk about his experiences in the service and in college, and she learned a great deal from him.

When the therapist asks about her father's course of illness, Carly suddenly becomes distraught. She tries to stifle sobs, wipes away tears, apologizes, and says that she is just not herself ever since his death, and doesn't know why this is happening to her. "I was not like this before, I was always an optimistic person. I'll never be that way again. Never. I hide this from my mom, because it worries and upsets her if I start to cry. And I know she misses my dad, too."

She tells the therapist that her father's deterioration was horrible. She sounds bitter and angry, "Some of those nurses didn't even try to help him in the hospital, and when they did, it just seemed like they were torturing him. We should not have let them do those extra tests. I'll never forgive myself for that. He didn't want to die, he had so much to live for. We wanted them to do anything they could do, if it would have saved him. I just think that if we'd taken him to another hospital, like MSK, they could have caught this earlier. I just feel like there had to be something that we could've done to stop this from progressing. People survive colon cancer all the time. There was one time when he even talked to us about looking into experimental treatment. I can't get that

time out of my mind. Why didn't we take him there?" She continues, "I think of this all of the time, but I don't tell anyone. Why did this have to happen to our family? He was such a good person, he didn't deserve this. I just don't know how to get this pain to stop."

Carly explains that she finds it difficult to be with her friends now, "I put on a happy face around them, but I can't wait to get away, and when I leave, I get so mad or start crying, or both. It's so unfair that they have their parents. They don't get it. Honestly, I only go out so my mom won't worry as much about me." She adds that she has lost all interest in dating or returning to school. "How can I plan a future when my career interests were because of all he gave me? And how could I ever become involved with a guy who will never know the most important person in my life?" She denies thoughts of suicide, though she often wishes that she would just not wake up in the morning. Shortly after he died, the family moved most of her dad's belongings up to the attic, since it was too upsetting to see his record albums and books. "I just cannot believe he's gone. I can't listen to any of that music anymore; it just hurts too much. I can't imagine ever enjoying music without him here. Every time I read something interesting, my first thought is that I want to share it with him to hear what he thinks. It feels like a stab in my heart. I don't read history at all anymore." Carly has not been to the cemetery since the burial. She has not been in touch with anyone at the university where she was enrolled, nor has she been on campus. At her mother's urging, she took a part time job at a local bank which is almost the only time she has left the house in the past two years. She gets along with coworkers but has never mentioned her personal life or her father's death with anyone there.

Carly ends the session by saying that she knows that her mother is right, her life is just passing her by, but adds that she cannot imagine how it can be any other way.