



# The Sudden Death of a Child

When death comes without warning, the shock and disbelief can be overwhelming.

It is never in the natural order of things for a child to die before his or her parents, and this can be especially intense when the death is sudden and/or violent. There is no opportunity to prepare, resolve misunderstandings, or “say good-bye.” Life for the parents and siblings is changed forever, often in an instant, and it takes time for the reality of what has happened to sink in.

## Shock

This is often the body’s first response to news of a sudden death. The shock presents itself much like a blow to the “core of one’s being.” A paralyzing sense of the surreal may be present, even allowing the immediate family to almost function normally, to go through a memorial service in relative calm, and to seem unable to express their grief in any visible way. This is part of the body’s natural defense mechanism, and it can take days, and most often weeks, for the bereaved to comprehend emotionally what has happened.

Part of this process is often an intense desire to know where the spirit of this child has gone so quickly. Religious beliefs are often challenged, questioned, and sometimes strengthened in the long run.

## Guilt

Guilt about what might have been done to prevent the death is also normal. Parents feel their job is to protect their child, and the “what if’s,” “why didn’t I’s,” and “if only’s” are natural;

however, they may wrongly lead to self-blame. No matter how irrational these feelings, it is helpful to talk them out, sharing with family and particularly nonjudgmental people who have been there such as members of The Compassionate Friends.

Keeping a journal can help express what it would have been like to say good-bye, to address unfinished issues, and to say things left unsaid. Eventually, the burden of guilt and need to blame oneself will move from being a main focus of grief to a level of acceptance that many tragedies in life are not preventable or foreseeable.

## Accepting the Reality

As the reality of the death settles in, intense anger at the injustice and deep anguish at the realization that the loss is “forever” are normal. Anger might be focused on those responsible, at a Higher Power, if they believe in one, for not saving the child. Discussions with other bereaved parents and siblings can help the newly bereaved to understand they are not alone and they are not “losing their minds.” Many families say that one of the most difficult things is to see the world go on when the child or brother or sister is gone. So it is important to find special ways to remember. These remembrances can be as simple as including the child’s name often in conversation, telling stories about the child, making a special memory album, or even holding special family memorial gatherings to remember and honor the child.

## Reorganization and Reinvesting in Life

While each person’s grief is as different as the individual, through this process the family learns to live without the child and the emptiness this absence brings. Complete recovery is a myth. Bereaved family members gradually put their lives back together again; however, it is not possible to have the same lives they had before. The family unit is changed forever. Families need both short- and long-term support when the death of a child is sudden. Some might also need support dealing with the fear that something tragic is going to happen to another loved one, which causes even more anxiety. In time--and that length of time is different for each individual griever--you will learn to live with the loss and incorporate it as part of everyday life. Further down the road, you will learn that despite your heartbreaking loss, that joy and laughter will enter your life again, and that the two can coexist; though you can scarcely believe that possible now, it will.

The hurt slowly changes from intense pain and a focus on the death event to warmer memories and a commitment to lead lives in honor of the child that died and in a way that would make that child proud. Some people create memorials, set up scholarships, or become advocates to correct injustices related to the death. These are all constructive, representing some “good” that can come from the tragedy.

As time passes, many who find support and friendship through The Compassionate Friends also find it helpful to stay active in the organization by “giving back.” One of the best ways to receive continuing support through the bereavement process is to help other families just starting on their grief journey. Many search for meaningful ways to give life a new sense of purpose. In diverse ways, they may

also create meaning out of their tragedy, integrate the loss into their own lives, and reinvest in love, work, and living. Many find that helping others can be very healing.

The bond with the child, brother, or sister will never be broken, because the love that has been shared will always remain.

## Common Emotions Experienced by Bereaved Parents

- Guilt and regret are common emotions of grief. Many bereaved parents feel that if only they would have done or said something different, the death might not have occurred. By openly sharing your feelings of guilt and regret with others who understand your loss, you may come to a place where you can forgive yourself or come to an understanding that you could not have prevented your child's death.
- Despair and loneliness are common emotions of grief. You may still feel alone even when you are with a group of people. Few people can truly understand how deeply a bereaved parent hurts unless they have experienced a similar loss. People usually understand grief to the level they have experienced it. Finding support from others who have experienced a similar loss can help.
- Anger is a common emotion in grief. Anger is often aimed at a person that is believed to have caused the death, at others who cannot understand your feelings, and sometimes at the child who died. Anger is not always expressed in negative ways. Many bereaved parents have directed their anger in positive ways, by working to change laws, build foundations, raise money, fund scholarships and other avenues as a catalyst for positive change.
- A wish to join your child who died is a normal and natural reaction to the pain you are experiencing. If these feelings become overwhelming and you begin to consider taking action, it is imperative that you seek professional support immediately. National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, [suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org) or 1-800-273-8255.

## Will Life Ever Be Good Again?

- Many grieving parents wonder if life will ever be good again. It is often hard to imagine ever smiling, laughing or finding joy again. It is important to understand that grief is a journey; the sharp and jagged pain you feel right now will eventually begin to soften. In time your focus can shift away from your child's death toward your child's life. It is important that you tell your story and are allowed to say your child's name as you move forward in life. You will never forget them; you will always love them, and if your life is to be good again you must continue to fully express that love. Many grieving parents find that helping others, in honor of their child who has died, can be a healing and helpful way to express that love.
- While every parent will ultimately have to find their own road through grief, you will survive and you do not have to walk this journey on your own. There is plenty of support available from those who have already been where you are today. You need not walk alone.
- The support of others who have experienced a similar loss can help you more fully understand the grieving process and give you hope that if others can survive this loss, so can you. Let others who can lend a hand help you by cooking the meals, cleaning the house or running errands for you. The help of others can give you the needed space to do the hard work of grieving.

## The Compassionate Friends Provides Support

The Compassionate Friends is here to provide you support. Stop by our national website at [www.compassionatefriends.org](http://www.compassionatefriends.org) to look at the many resources that we offer our bereaved parents, siblings and grandparents, as well as information on our organization and events. You can also locate information on the nearest TCF Chapter (serving every state plus Washington D.C., Puerto Rico, Saipan, and Guam) where you can share with others, in an atmosphere of acceptance and understanding. On TCF's national website, also look for other resources such as our private Facebook groups and Online Support Community ([www.compassionatefriends.org/find-support/online-communities/](http://www.compassionatefriends.org/find-support/online-communities/)), available to help soften over time the painful aspects of bereavement. Remember that you will never have to travel this journey alone.

*This brochure sponsored by  
parents Carla and Stacey Glaus and sister Alecia Glaus  
in loving memory of Tyler Glaus, their son and brother*

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