When the death has an associated stigma we may experience additional layers of pain on our grief journey. Examples of stigmatized losses include HIV/AIDS, suicide, substance related causes, homicide and mental health issues.

The same might be true after a child drowns; stigma and judgment after the loss of a child remains a fearful event for many. Fear can create judgment and stigma. The definition of stigma is “a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person.” Stigma concerns can raise feelings of shame, blame, hopelessness, distress and a reluctance to seek and/or accept support.

Failure of family, friends and/or society, to acknowledge your loss can be hurtful provoking feelings of isolation, guilt, anger and confusion.

The Emotional Roller Coaster

Denial and feelings of shock, guilt, anger, and depression are often a normal part of grief reactions. These emotions are often heightened when a child dies from a perceived stigmatized loss. With some such losses the person and family have struggled or suffered for long periods of time. When this is true, chronic exhaustion and worry have been present for a while. When death happens you may already be worn down. Even without such struggles, the process of grief for a stigmatized loss only adds to the roller coaster ride of bereavement. We ask ourselves: What could I have done differently? Will others question my parenting skills?

Anger

You may feel anger. Your anger may be directed at your child, those you believe may have contributed to your child’s death, those you believe failed to help your child, God or just the world in general. You may be angry with yourself because you were unable to save your child. It’s okay to express anger, a common emotion when a child has died for any reason. Sometimes healing cannot begin until this anger is confronted and expressed. However, a healthy expression of anger does not include hurting yourself or others.

Guilt

Feelings of guilt following a child’s death from any cause are normal. This is true for parents and family, friends, classmates and even coworkers. “If only” is a phrase you may find yourself repeating frequently. Sometimes you may need to go through a feeling to get beyond it. You may need to feel guilty for a while until you begin to understand that you are ultimately not responsible for the decisions and actions of another human being, including your child. Believe in yourself. You did all you could. You are human—accept your limitations.

Questioning

Some parents feel a need to ask “why?” Often there are no clear answers, which can be highly frustrating for parents and other family members who want to understand. Eventually you may reach a point where you realize there are some questions about the death of your child that will never be answered.

Depression

After the loss of a child, it is a normal part of bereavement to experience some symptoms of depression such as lack of energy, problems sleeping, difficulty concentrating, not wanting to talk with others and the feeling there is nothing to live for are all normal reactions in bereavement. You can improve this type of depression with moderate physical activity, plenty of rest and a good diet. Allow family and friends to help you and even take care of you. You don’t have to be strong all the time. Maintain contact with people you value. Talking with others who have been through a similar situation may help you to cope.
Though this seems impossible now, you may even learn it is okay to laugh and smile. If the depression does not appear to lessen over time, you may want to talk with a qualified professional who can determine how best to help you.

**Spiritual Disillusionment**

Parents who have a belief in God may find themselves in a spiritual crisis as they question their beliefs. Religious concerns about the hereafter often surface. “Why did God let this happen?” is a question we can no more answer than all the other questions about imperfections in this world. Talking about spiritual and philosophical questions with other parents who have experienced a similar loss may be helpful. For those with concerns of a spiritual nature, try to find an understanding, nonjudgmental member of your faith and open yourself to that person.

**Coping Constructively**

As a family, talk about the death with one another; discuss your loss and your pain. Talk about the good times you remember, as well as those times that were not so good. All family members, including surviving siblings, will be grieving in their own manner and in their own time frame — do your best to honor these differences and allow everyone to feel included. Surviving siblings need to know that you care about them just as much as your child who died. Remember that it is better to express feelings than to internalize them and that crying is healthy and therapeutic.

You may find it helpful to write out your feelings or to write a letter to your child who has died, expressing the things you were not able to say before the death. For many, this is a good way to say, “I love you!”

Allow friends to help you. When they ask what they can do for you, don’t be afraid to tell them what they can do to help you. Sometimes all you need is someone to listen. Being honest with them about your needs also helps them.

Consider becoming involved with a self-help bereavement support group such as The Compassionate Friends. By sharing with others who have walked a similar path, you may gain some understanding of your reactions and learn ways to cope. Seek professional help and family counseling if necessary.

In time, you may find yourself drawn to help others in your child’s memory. Often referred to as reinvestment, such activities may include offering scholarships, writing stories for publication, starting foundations in memory of your child and providing emotional support for others whose child has died. You may find yourself involved in the fight against shattering the stigma associated with stigmatized losses. You’ll know when something comes along that is right for you.

Give yourself time, time and more time. It can take months and sometimes years to open your heart and mind to healing and finding the “new me.” While you will never be the same person you were before the death of your child, choose to survive and then be patient with yourself. In time, your grief will soften as you begin to integrate this loss and heal. Reinvesting in life will come. Eventually you will recall the good times from when your child lived, rather than the bad times of how your child died.

**Beyond the Stigma**

When we lose a child to a stigmatized loss, the stigma can carry social discrimination that causes some to hide the cause of death from others, even those who are willing to offer support. Sometimes the first obstacle is our own lack of understanding about issues such as HIV/AIDS, mental health, suicide or substance use disorder. In some situations, the criminal justice system is a mystery. Life is complex. Loss of a beloved child complicates everything for many.

One common choice is to share openly about the cause of our loved one’s death. Others choose to delay such open disclosure. When we are ready the choice is always ours. Regardless, share the joy of speaking about your child to your family and friends who want to support you. The cause of death does not define the sum of your child’s life. Remember and honor the precious life of your child, focusing on their accomplishments and aspirations.

*This brochure sponsored by The Katrina Tagget Memorial Foundation in loving memory of Katrina “Kara” Tagget, daughter of Sara & David, and brother of Blake*