



Understanding Grief *When a Child Dies*

When your child dies, the pain and devastation of your loss can feel overwhelming. Some of the immediate emotions in grief are shock, numbness, denial, confusion and disbelief, all of which can act as a cushion against the full impact of your loss. As time passes, some of these early emotions may begin to wear off as others emerge, including guilt, anger, loneliness, despair, sadness and regret. Because of the intensity of all of the emotions you are feeling, you may not be fully able to comprehend all that you are experiencing. These feelings and emotions are all a normal and natural response to the death of someone you love.

Every individual will process grief in their own unique way. Some can and will express their pain easily and openly, while others will keep their feelings locked inside. While there is no “right” or “wrong” way to grieve, many bereaved parents have found it helpful to have some guidance and support along the way. The following information has been prepared by bereaved parents to help you on your grief journey.

Emotional Aspects of Grief

The grief journey has many emotional peaks and valleys and lasts far longer than society in general recognizes. Because each person’s grief journey is unique, you may find that you, your spouse and your family are all processing their grief at different speeds and in different ways. The death of a child isn’t something you will get over; it is something you will learn to go through.

When your child dies, the grief journey does not end in a week,

a month or even a year. Don’t let others’ expectations be a guideline for your own progress. Be patient with yourself and with your family members. It also helps to be tolerant and accepting of the different approaches others may take.

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 acting on those feelings, it is imperative that you seek professional support immediately. National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, suicidepreventionlifeline.org or 1-800-273-8255.

Physical Aspects of Grief

Grief will often manifest itself in physical ways. You may find yourself unable to sleep or eat; or you may want to sleep or eat constantly. Feeling tired, walking in a fog, long and short-term memory loss and an inability to concentrate are common. When you are grieving, your body is going through stress. Eating a healthy diet, drinking lots of water combined with walking and light exercise can help.

Spiritual Aspects of Grief

Reexamining priorities and questioning your belief structures is normal. Many in grief find their faith to be a source of great strength, while others do not. It is important to be patient with yourself as you sort out your feelings.

Making Decisions

When a child has died, parents are often faced with decisions affecting the future. Changing jobs or moving away are two major decisions that bereaved parents often face and may falsely believe “if we do this, we will feel better.” Hold off on major decisions until the time is right. When you move, you may lose the very support system that you need the most.

Do not be rushed or forced into doing things by others who may be well-meaning but misinformed. Cleaning out a child’s room and their belongings is very personal; take your time and do this when YOU are ready. Some find that going through their child’s belongings is a natural part of the grieving process and helps them with processing their loss. Smelling their child’s clothes, for instance, can bring a feeling of nearness. Others may find it impossible to tackle this job. Trust your instincts as you will know when and if the time is right.

Keeping the Family Together

All too many professionals believe divorce is almost a certainty after a child has died. The reality is that statistics show the divorce rate among couples who have experienced the death of a child is almost equal to society at large. Unless a marriage already has problems, the death of a child is more likely to foster a stronger bond than existed before as family members reach out to each other for support in this shared experience. But it still takes work and the understanding that everyone grieves differently.

Surviving siblings are often referred to as the “forgotten mourners” because so much attention is placed on the parents and the child who died. Making certain your surviving children understand that this is a shared family experience can help them to feel included and important. Frank and open communication is the key to keeping the family together. Assure surviving children that you recognize they are grieving too and that you love them just as much as the sibling who died. Appropriate grieving on your part will act as a guide for them and confirm their own feelings.

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.

Many parents turn to The Compassionate Friends for support, finding hope and comfort through sharing their story with others and being able to say the child’s name without fear of others turning away when the tears do come. Sharing your thoughts and feelings eases the loneliness and allows expression of grief in an atmosphere of acceptance and understanding.