



UNDERSTANDING A PARENT'S GRIEF



The death of a child is a life altering situation. It is a major disruption of a person's life with many ebbs and flows that are unique to each individual. After the death of their child, a parent begins a lifelong journey of experiencing the pain of grief, adapting to a new way of understanding themselves and the world around them, and of learning to live a changed life when a person may have greatly loved their old life. Grief changes many things for them including aspects of their personality and preferences, priorities and lifestyle choices, and many things they have deemed important in the past. Having a better understanding of a parent's grief can help us to be more empathetic as we interact with them, whether we are a friend, family member, professional, co-worker, or neighbor. Here are a few facts about a parent's grief after a child dies that might help build perspective.

GRIEF IS A MAJOR DISRUPTION TO A BEREAVED PARENT'S LIFE

There is a false assumption by some in our society that grief is a minor disruption that a person should work through and ultimately bounce back from in a short amount of time. The reality is quite different. The death of a child is a major disruption to a person's life on many levels. Understanding this can ensure that you are there for the long-term ebbs and flows that are certain to accompany a bereaved parent's grief. Here are some of the ways that grief disrupts a bereaved parent's life.

Focus and Concentration

Grief affects a person mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Grief infiltrates a person's thoughts and consumes their energy. Many people describe it as a "fog" that settles in for some time after a person's death. Bereaved people report not being able to focus and concentrate due to being preoccupied with grief, the changes that grief has brought to their life, and the constant reminders of their person's absence in their life. For some, the pain of grief affects their ability to focus or concentrate.

Assumptions of the World, Self, and Others

Grief challenges many of the assumptions people have about their lives. Individuals may wrestle with personal beliefs about faith or how the world works. People may also struggle with belief in their own abilities, or even guilt, about their person's death. They may be angry at someone else whom they may blame for the death. Sometimes, people may also struggle with trust in their ability to have a measure of control over their own life. A bereaved person is transitioning to a world where their person has died and is no longer physically present with them. This effort to shift perspectives or to accept a new way of being is often ongoing and takes longer than a person, or their friends and family, might want.

Relationships with Friends and Family

Each person in a family grieves in their own way. This can cause misunderstanding between family members as people walk through grief in their own way. Friends may struggle with how to support a person. Sometimes they may do or say the wrong things, which can cause division or significant changes to the relationship. People often want the bereaved person to go back to being who they were, leading to misunderstanding and resentment. Many bereaved people evaluate their relationship with friends and family after a death. This shift is a normal part of grief for many.

Routines, Traditions, and Responsibilities

The death of someone and their absence in the family causes a ripple effect that can shift priorities, routines, and traditions that may have been long-standing. Also, the roles and responsibilities that a person fills within a relationship or family are compromised. Individuals and families may find it challenging to take on new responsibilities and fill new roles that before belonged to the person who died. This is a normal transition that takes place within families and individual lives after a death.

Meaning and Purpose

Much of our life is defined by the relationships we have with others and the role we play in others' lives. When someone dies, people will often struggle to find meaning and purpose in life again. They may wrestle with "why" their person died and how they can go on living without them in their lives. Bereaved people often prioritize what is important to them in light of their loss. They may be experiencing feelings of guilt, shame, blame, or regret. Though it may take longer than a person or those around them may want, it is normal for people to reconstruct their sense of meaning and purpose after a loss.

GRIEF IS A TRANSITION WITH MANY EBBS AND FLOWS

The Stages of Grief, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance offer a familiar framework of a person's grief, yet the reality is that grief is messy and does not follow an orderly set of stages. Grief manifests in people's lives in a variety of ways and there are many factors that impact grief's trajectory, including a person's personality, their relationship to the deceased person, the level of support available to them, the way in which the person died, and the choices a person makes as they are grieving. Grief is not a problem that needs to be fixed or for which there is a single solution. Nor is there a set of stages that predict or lead to an outcome of acceptance. Rather, grief is an experience that people are living through that continues to impact them in different ways across their lifespans.

GRIEF IS A PROCESS OF ADAPTING TO A NEW WAY OF UNDERSTANDING AND LIVING

With grief comes a new reality in which a bereaved person must learn to live. Grief changes many things for people, including their priorities, their lifestyle, and many of the things they may have deemed important in the past. Grief can also affect key aspects of a person's personality and preferences. This can be challenging for friends and family. Given our human resistance to change, people often want a bereaved person to "bounce back" to the person they were before. In this way, family and friends must also shift their perspectives as a person adapts to the ways that grief has changed their circumstances and how they have changed personally because of their grief.

GRIEF IS ENDURING AND HAS NO TIME LIMIT

This is one of the harsher realities of grief, that grief is enduring. Bereaved individuals are not "doing it wrong" when they continue to experience grief over time. People find ways to cope with grief and continue to build new experiences. They can find ways to have joy and meaning in life as well. At the same time, grief may also continue to be ever-present. Anniversaries, birthdays, special occasions, special songs, locations, activities, and traditions are reminders of the people in our lives who have died. All of these things can touch the grief that resides within us at different times throughout our lives. Sometimes it also elicits new grief. This is normal and to be expected.



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