



Understanding Grief: When a Child Dies

When a Child Dies

When a child dies, parents mourn and begin the long process of bereavement. Those who have had a child die often immediately experience shock, numbness, denial, and disbelief, all of which act as a cushion against the full impact of the loss. As time passes and these emotions wear off, others emerge, often including guilt, anger, loneliness, despair, sadness, and regret. These feelings are all part of the emotional reaction called "grief" and may be so overwhelming that parents often do not understand what they are experiencing.

Parents will approach this emotional process in different ways. Some express their grief easily and openly, while others keep their feelings locked inside. While there is no "right" way in which to grieve, many bereaved parents have found it helpful to have some guidance along the way. The following information has been prepared by parents who have, themselves, experienced the death of a child.

Emotional Aspects of Grief

Grief, with its many peaks and valleys, lasts far longer than society recognizes. When your child dies, grief is not over in a week, a month, or even a year. Expectations others may have of you should not be a guideline for your own progress. Be patient with yourself. You've been through a lot.

Because each person's grief is different, don't expect that you and your spouse will travel this journey at the same speed or in the same way. Be tolerant of the different approaches your spouse and other family members may take.

Some of the common emotions experienced by bereaved parents:

- Guilt, real or imagined, is normal. The feeling that if only something had been different, the child might have lived, is common. By learning to express and share this feeling with other bereaved parents, eventually you may forgive yourself, understanding that no one can foresee the future.
- Despair and loneliness are common. Even when you are with a group of people, you may feel alone. Few people can understand how deeply a bereaved parent hurts unless they have been there.
- Anger often emerges, sometimes aimed at a person imagined to have caused the death, at others who cannot understand your feelings, at a higher power, even at the very child who died.
- A wish to join the child who died is natural.



Physical Aspects of Grief

The emotional loss of grief often manifests itself in physical ways. Parents may sleep for only a few hours, if at all, each night. Feeling tired, walking in a fog, long- and short-term memory loss, and an inability to concentrate are not uncommon. Sleep deprivation and the extreme stress of the situation often lead to the feeling that you are "losing it," but this is a normal psychological reaction.

At this time, a balanced diet, rest, and moderate exercise are especially important. Crying also has been proven to have a healing effect, and should not be stifled because of societal views.

It is especially important to avoid the use of drugs and alcohol in hopes of making the pain go away. Prescription medication should be taken sparingly and only under the supervision of a physician. Many substances are addictive and may lead to a chemical dependence that stops or delays the necessary grieving process.

Making Decisions

When a child has died, parents are often faced with decisions affecting the future. Changing jobs or moving away is two major decisions that oftentimes face bereaved parents who falsely believe that "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 belongings is very personal. Some find it a natural part of the bereavement process that helps in coping with the loss. Smelling a child's clothes, for instance, can bring a feeling of nearness. Others may find it impossible to tackle this job. If that is the case, ask for help, but only if you are certain you need it.

Keeping the Family Together

All too many professionals believe divorce is almost a certainty after a child has died. The reality is that unless a marriage already has problems, the death of a child is more likely to foster a stronger bond than existed before as husband and wife 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. Make certain your surviving children understand this is a shared family experience, and try to include them in all family plans and decisions. Siblings should never be made to feel less important because parents are concentrating so much on the child who died. 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 child who died. Appropriate grieving on your part will act as a guide for them and confirm their own feelings.



How Can I Face the Future?

Parents may feel they have nothing to live for and thus think about a release from the intense pain. Many parents do feel this way, but be assured that a sense of purpose and meaning does return. The pain does lessen.

Support is necessary to work through this time while you are finding the new "you" and while the family dynamics change. Let others cook the meals, take the children to school, help around the house. Give yourself space to do the hard work of grieving.

Reexamining priorities and even questioning belief structures is not abnormal. See what you can do about arranging additional time off from work. Plan ahead how you will handle special days such as anniversary dates and holidays. Often the day is easier than the dread that often leads up to it.

While professional help may be needed, many parents do turn to The Compassionate Friends or similar support groups for support, finding hope and comfort through sharing their story with others, and being able to speak the child's name without fear of others turning away when the tears do come. Sharing eases loneliness and allows expression of grief in an atmosphere of acceptance and understanding.

Every parent will have to find his or her own road through grief. But you will survive. You need not walk alone.

Source: The Compassionate Friends (compassionatefriends.org)

Resources Are Available

Additional information, self-help tools and other resources are available online at www.MagellanHealth.com/member. You can also call us for more information, help and support. Providers are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week to provide confidential assistance at no cost to you.



This document is for your information only. It is not meant to give medical advice. It should not be used to replace a visit with a provider. Magellan Health Services does not endorse other resources that may be mentioned here.