

# When Your 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. There is no right or wrong way to grieve.

The grief journey has many emotional peaks and valleys and lasts far longer than society generally recognizes. Because each person's grief 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 loss 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 differently, 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. 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, at God 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.

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. It is especially important to avoid the abuse 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.

Reexamining priorities and questioning your belief structures is normal. Many in grief find their faith to be a source of great strength, while others are mad at God. Allowing yourself to fully feel and openly express the changes you may be experiencing in your belief structure can be helpful.

Do not be rushed or forced into doing things by others. Cleaning out a child's room and their belongings is very personal, take your time and do this when YOU are ready.

Make certain your surviving children understand that this is a shared family experience and 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 child who died.

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