

Grieving the Loss of a Child

No parent is prepared for a child's death. Parents are simply not supposed to outlive their children. It is important to remember that how long your child lived does not determine the size of your loss. The loss of a child is profound at every age.

Parents of young children are intimately involved in their daily lives. Death changes every aspect of family life, often leaving an enormous emptiness.

You may find that you also grieve for the hopes and dreams you had for your child, the potential that will never be realized, and the experiences you will never share. If you lost your only child, you may also feel that you have lost your identity as a parent and perhaps the possibility of grandchildren. The pain of these losses will always be a part of you. Yet with time, most parents find a way forward and begin to experience happiness and meaning in life once again.

Common grief reactions

Grief reactions after the death of a child are similar to those after other losses. But, they are often more intense and last longer. You may experience the following grief reactions:

- ☒ Intense shock, confusion, disbelief, and denial, even if your child's death was expected
- ☒ Overwhelming sadness and despair, such that facing daily tasks or even getting out of bed can seem impossible
- ☒ Extreme guilt or a feeling that you have failed as your child's protector and could have done something differently
- ☒ Intense anger and feelings of bitterness and unfairness at a life left unfulfilled
- ☒ Fear or dread of being alone and overprotecting your surviving children
- ☒ Resentment toward parents with healthy children
- ☒ Feeling that life has no meaning and wishing to be released from the pain or to join your child
- ☒ Questioning or losing faith or spiritual beliefs
- ☒ Dreaming about your child or feeling your child's presence nearby
- ☒ Intense loneliness and isolation, even when around other people, and feeling that no one can truly understand how you feel

Timing of your grief reactions

Some people expect that grief should be resolved over a specific time, such as a year. But this is not true. The initial severe and intense grief you feel will not be continuous. Periods of intense grief often come and go over 18 months or longer. Over time, your grief may come in waves that are gradually less intense and less frequent. But you will likely always have some feelings of sadness and loss.

Even years after your child's death, important events and milestones in the lives of other children can trigger grief. Significant days such as graduations, weddings, or the first day of a new school year are common triggers. At these times, you may find yourself thinking about how old your child would be or what he or she would look like or be doing if still alive.

Differences in how parents grieve

Parents may grieve in different ways depending on their gender and their daily role in a child's life. One parent may find that talking helps, while the other may need quiet time to grieve alone. Cultural expectations and role differences also affect how parents grieve. Men are often expected to control their emotions, be strong, and take charge of the family. Women may be expected to cry openly and want to talk about their grief. If you are a working parent, you may become more involved in your job to escape the sadness and daily reminders at home. A stay-at-home parent may be surrounded by constant reminders and may feel a lack of purpose now that his or her job as caregiver has abruptly ended. This is especially true for a parent who spent months or even years caring for a child with cancer. Differences in grieving can cause relationship difficulties at a time when parents need each other's support the most. One parent may believe that the other is not grieving properly or that a lack of open grief means he or she loved the child less. Talk openly about your grief with your partner. Work to understand and accept each other's coping styles.

Helping yourself grieve

As much as it hurts, it is natural and normal to grieve. You may find the following suggestions helpful while grieving:

Talk about your child often and use his or her name.

Ask family and friends for help with housework, errands, and caring for other children. This will give you important time to think, remember, and grieve.

Take time deciding what to do with your child's belongings. Don't rush to pack up your child's room or to give away toys and clothes. Prepare ahead of time for how to respond to difficult questions like, "How many children do you have?" or comments like, "At least you have other children." Remember that people aren't trying to hurt you; they just don't know what to say.

Prepare for how you want to spend significant days, such as your child's birthday or the anniversary of your child's death. You may want to spend the day looking at photos and sharing memories or start a family tradition, such as planting flowers. Because of the intensity and isolation of parental grief, parents may especially benefit from a support group where they can share their experiences with other parents who understand their grief and can offer hope. Learn more about coping strategies for when you are grieving

Finding meaning in life

You should expect that you will never really “get over” the death of your child. But you will learn to live with the loss, making it a part of who you are. Your child’s death may make you rethink your priorities and the meaning of life. It may seem impossible, but you can find happiness and purpose in life again.

For some parents, an important step may be creating a legacy for your child. You may choose to honor your child by volunteering at a local hospital or a cancer support organization. Or you may work to support interests your child once had, start a memorial fund, or plant trees in your child's memory. It is important to remember that it is never disloyal to your child to reengage in life and to enjoy new experiences.

Each of your children changes your life. They show you new ways to love, new things to find joy in, and new ways to look at the world. A part of each child's legacy is that the changes he or she brings to your family continue after death. The memories of joyful moments you spent with your child and the love you shared will live on and always be part of you.