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Parents Who Are Now Childless

The death of any child overwhelms that child's parents regardless of the cause of death or the age of the child. Parental grief is intense, long lasting and complex. Many believe that this grief, desolation, and pain exceed all other bereavement experiences a person encounters in a lifetime. Bereaved parents are completely bewildered and find it and find it difficult just to function. When a parent faces the death of an only child or the death of the last child or children, bereavement is compounded by additional issues that ultimately must be resolved if healing is to occur.

Now Childless

Suddenly we are childless. The new and total silence in our lives is unbroken. The lack of surviving children is but one additional heartbreaking issue that initially deepens our devastation. However our children have died, the joy we knew in sharing their lives is forever gone. Our world feels abruptly empty. We think that we stand alone. Many question the value of existence. These feelings may last for many months, even years, as we move through early bereavement. It is important to remember that these thoughts and feelings are normal.

Although these early months and years seem endless and the anguish bottomless, we can slowly get better. Those of us who share this experience know that with effort and slowly emerging resolve, we can make progress. Although many of us will remain childless, we have sought and embraced healing. Our lives may not be what we had planned, but living can still hold beauty, joy, and peace.

Are We Still Parents?

We who are without surviving children find our own parental identity suddenly questioned because we no longer practice parenting. Ultimately, however, we realize that we are forever parents. The memories of our children and the love we shared with them live on, a part of us always. During early bereavement, memories can be extremely painful. In the years beyond bereavement, our memories, while bittersweet at times, are usually sources of comfort and even joy.

The Journey Through Grief

You are probably reading this pamphlet early in your bereavement. Therefore, it is wise to deal first with the problems of this period and later to cope with the quest for renewal. Do not postpone your grief nor walk too quickly through the pain of your forced goodbye. Sorrow will surely accompany you on this journey, but do not fear or reject it. It is as natural and normal as the night, which follows day. Your emotions will resemble a turbulent roller coaster for a long time. You may find that tears respect neither time or place. Remember that tears release emotional pain and help to prevent physical ailments caused or exacerbated by stress.

You will find that laughter as well as tears are equally important in your recovery. Although you will need time to genuinely enjoy yourself again, you need not feel guilty about expressing either emotion. Try to accept such relief when it occurs.

You may find joy in commemorating your child's life by sharing it with others. You will rediscover a greater depth of joy and laughter, finding once more that your life with your departed son or daughter held far more happiness than sorrow. Others who have not experienced the death of their children cannot know or even imagine what you are enduring. To explain to these persons that your feelings are real and appropriate can be beneficial both to them and to you.

You may wish to surround yourself with others who have experienced the pain of a child's death. Locate a Compassionate Friends' chapter or other support group that you can attend regularly. Although most parents who have surviving children cannot understand the full dimensions of your situation, you will quickly see that every child's death is the end of a unique only child.

Other bereaved parents will understand your pain, your emptiness. With them, you can cry and grieve, knowing that you are understood. You will not feel alone. With them, you can approach a new future to replace the one you have lost.

How Many Children Do You Have?

Bereaved parents find it difficult to answer the question, "How many children do you have?" Some wish to honour their children's memories by acknowledging their lives and answering, "I had one child," or "I had two children". Others are more comfortable answering, "None". You may find that your answer changes as your needs change. The key is to be prepared to say what you want to say at the moment.

As we mourn our great losses, some family members and friends urge us to concentrate on what we have left. Since we often feel that we have nothing left, we may resent these urgings. At these times it is important to remember that our family and friends want to alleviate our suffering. They want to see us whole once more, not only because they love us, but also because our pain reflects their own fears of death, both for themselves and their loved ones. Nevertheless, healing will take considerable time (and there are no prescribed limits!) before we see with clarity just what we do have left.

Memories

Do not be afraid to keep the memories of your child alive. It is possible to take mementos of the past and make them a part of today and tomorrow. You may find it comforting to wear some article of clothing or a favourite piece of jewellery that your child once wore. You might choose bits and pieces that were a part your child's life and make a collage or a quilt to hang in your home. Even a favourite toy on a shelf is a way to ensure that your child's memory is a tangible presence in your daily life.

Reinvestment

One of the most demanding challenges we face is to refocus our lives. The loss of purpose and the thought of a lonely life, possibly without subsequent children or sons/daughters-in-law or grandchildren can be frightening. In general we often find it difficult to see anything beyond unrelenting despair.

Gradually, however, we find new friends, and our lives begin to inch forward. Old friends who have been unable to bear misfortune with us often take lesser roles in our lives. Family ties enter a slow period of readjustment. Reinvestment is difficult as we re-evaluate our current lives and resolve to recover from our losses. At this point the grief intensity lessens, and many of us resolve to live the remainder of our lives in a way that will commemorate our children's lives. Many others strive to accomplish those things their children might have tried to do if time and life had afforded them the chance.

Reinvestment demands more than a single decision or a simple solution and awakens us to new goals and priorities. We may reinvest in life in countless ways. Some have capitalized upon their parenting skills by becoming foster parents or by volunteering in boy scouts or girl scouts or other youth organizations, while others have relinquished their parental roles by working in a variety of other community causes.

Most of us want to do something constructive in memory of our sons or daughters. Many of us have established memorial funds, created scholarships, given books to libraries, planted trees, become involved in helping others, or whatever else imagination and love can create. For many of us, such memorials keep the memories of our children alive and vibrant, giving others and us opportunities to feel the beauty of our departed children's love.

Whatever our situation, we are not actually alone in our grief. Many other bereaved parents seek and have achieved healing. Through sharing with others, you may become one of the healed and then help to heal. Over time, as we mutually reach out to each other in sorrow and love, all of us come closer to being whole again.

Someday, which differs from parent to parent, you will recognize that you are certainly making progress in your journey through grief. You will sleep and awaken, for instance, without your child's absence being the dominant theme. Then you will have the opportunity to reinvest in a world in which your child's life and death have indeed made a difference.