



The Compassionate Friends Victoria, Australia

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The Grief of Stepparents When a Child Dies

The death of a stepchild sets into motion complex issues which vary from family to family for many different reasons. The length and quality of the marriage and the nature of the biological parent/child relationship play a primary role in the grief that follows. A stepparent may have parented this child for many years and invested much time and love. On the other hand, there may not have been the necessary time or opportunity to bond with the child. Sometimes personality conflicts make warm relationships impossible, often leaving the stepparent with ambivalent feelings of relief and remorse, which further complicates an already complicated situation.

Understanding Parental Grief

When a child dies, the people who loved that child experience some form of grief. These forms may vary and as a consequence grief reactions may differ. Some typical reactions include the following:

- Crying, loneliness, a feeling of isolation.
- A need to talk about the death and the circumstances surrounding it.
- Feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, depression.
- Anger, guilt, blame.
- Loss of appetite, overeating, sleeplessness, irritability.
- Inability to concentrate, comprehend, or remember.
- Loss of goals and aims in life, a sense of desolation about the future.

Grief can last far longer than expected. In particular, the first year, with its many ups and downs can be especially difficult. There are many WHY? and WHAT IF . . .? questions that do not have adequate or satisfying answers. It is also normal for a stepparent to have feelings of personal failure because of feeling the death should have been preventable. Sharing these feelings with an understanding person can often help stepparents learn to forgive themselves and others.

Circumstances Of The Death

The circumstances of the death may also influence grief reactions. Each loss, whatever the cause, may bring with it complicating factors. For instance, it may be necessary to cope with a police investigation, trial, or intrusive publicity. In these circumstances, grieving is often put aside while the daily reality of coping with such factors is necessary.

Another factor affecting stepparent grief may be the issue of who was actually physically caring for the child at the time of death. Anger and guilt are typical grief reactions but can be heightened when a stepparent is the care-giving parent when the death occurs.

Open communication between biological parents and stepparents is extremely important as all parties try to assimilate information and details of the circumstances of the death. This quest for information might be misinterpreted as assigning blame or responsibility but should be recognized as an integral part of the grief experience. Parents, particularly those not physically present at the time of the death, have a need to know exactly what happened. When information is freely shared without prior judgment, misunderstandings may be avoided.

Stepparents May Feel Excluded

A stepparent may feel almost invisible to the spouse, other stepchildren, extended family, friends, clergy, or medical personnel. Stepparents may have found themselves excluded from important discussions about medical decisions or funeral arrangements. The assumption seems to be that the stepparent, unlike the biological parent, can't possibly understand or feel the depth of the loss. Additional pain is felt when others, with no malice intended, fail to acknowledge stepparents or make insensitive remarks. Sympathy cards may not include a stepparent's name. All these things serve to remind stepparents that their pain and concern is often unrecognised, seen as illegitimate or at best, misunderstood.

Old Feelings May Resurface

Be alert to the possibility that old unresolved emotional issues between the biological parents may become more pronounced after the death, especially if there had been conflicts over the parenting process. On the other hand, the biological parents may have a need at this time to cling together as they struggle with this loss, thus making a stepparent feel further isolated and even threatened. This is usually a temporary situation, but one that requires tolerance and restraint.

The Marriage Is Tested

A marriage in both intact families and stepfamilies, no matter the length, can experience its most severe test after the death of a child. The emotional distance between spouses can become immense. For many, this may be the time for the stepparent to tell the spouse:

- My feeling of helplessness over your agony is almost unbearable.
- I wish I could alleviate some of the depression and mood swings that you are experiencing. I feel useless when my attempts fail. Please tell me that my efforts are appreciated.
- It hurts to know that you sometimes feel there is nothing to live for; that the best is over; that our marriage is not enough to make you want to go on. Let me find the courage to acknowledge your feelings so that we can get beyond them. At least give me the job of listening.
- I "hold myself together" at times to help you through the crisis, not because I am not feeling pain
- I may have felt as strongly about the child who died as if he or she were mine. Please allow me that deep feeling and acknowledge my love for you and your child.
- Being a stepparent is both a risk and a reward. I need your love and support.
- Please don't shut me out. I care. Please talk to me.

Hope For The Future

For stepparents the grief experience may be a precarious journey as they try to balance the needs of their spouses, their own feelings, and other familial relationships. It is a time when patience, understanding and communication are of the utmost importance.

Many stepparents have overcome these obstacles and have found hope for the future through participation in support groups such as The Compassionate Friends. Sharing feelings and concerns with other parents, in an atmosphere of acceptance and understanding, can lessen the feelings of loneliness and isolation experienced by bereaved stepparents.