



The Compassionate Friends Victoria, Australia

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Understanding Grief...When a Child Dies When a Child Dies

When a child dies, parents mourn and begin a process of bereavement. Bereaved parents experience many different feelings—disbelief, sadness, loneliness, fear, anger, regret, guilt, despair and personal loss. These feelings are all a part of the emotional reaction called "grief."

Sometimes feelings of grief may be so intense that parents do not understand what is happening. Some parents tend to keep feelings inside, while others are able to express their grief easily and openly.

Although there is no "right way" to grieve, many bereaved parents have found that it is helpful to have some guideposts along the way. The following guidelines have been prepared by parents who have experienced the death of a child.

Emotional Aspects of Grief

Grief, with its many ups and downs, lasts far longer than society in general recognizes. Be patient with yourself.

Each person's grief is individual. You and your spouse will experience it and cope with it differently.

Guilt, real or imagined, is a normal part of grief. It surfaces in thoughts and feelings of "if only." In order to resolve this guilt, learn to express and share these feelings, and learn to forgive yourself.

Anger is another common reaction to loss. Anger, like guilt, needs expression and sharing in a healthy and acceptable manner.

Physical Aspects of Grief

Physical reactions to the death of a child may include loss of appetite or overeating, sleeplessness, and sexual difficulties. Parents may find that they have very little energy and cannot concentrate. A balanced diet, rest, and moderate exercise are especially important for the whole family at this time.

Crying is an acceptable and healthy expression of grief and releases built-up tension for mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters. Cry freely as you feel the need. Avoid the use of drugs and alcohol. Medication should be taken sparingly and only under the supervision of your physician. Many substances are addictive and can lead to a chemical dependence. In addition, they may stop or delay the necessary grieving process.

Making Decisions

When a child dies, most parents are confronted with making decisions about their child or the future. Decision-making can be stressful and result in feeling "if only we do this or that, then we will feel better."

Making these kinds of decisions, however, will not necessarily ease the pain of your grief. Avoid making hasty decisions about your child's belongings. Do not allow others to take over or rush you. You can do it little by little whenever you feel ready.

Whenever possible, put off major decisions about changing residences or changing jobs for a while.

How can I help My Surviving Children?

Children are often the forgotten grievers within a family. They are experiencing many of the same emotions you are, so share your thoughts and tears with them. Though it is a painful time, be sure they feel loved and included.

Special Occasions

Holidays and anniversaries of your child's birth and death can be stressful times. Consider the feelings of the entire family in planning how to spend the day. Allow time and space for your own emotional needs.

How Can I Face the Future?

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

A child's death often causes a parent to challenge and examine his faith or philosophy of life. Don't be disturbed if you are questioning old beliefs. Talk about it. For many, faith offers help to accept the unacceptable.

Bereaved parents and their families can find healing and hope for the future as they reorganize their lives in a positive way.

Where Can I get Help?

Many families who have experienced the death of a child have found it helps to become involved with a group such as The Compassionate Friends. Sharing eases loneliness and allows expression of grief in an atmosphere of acceptance and understanding.