



Dealing with the Death and Loss of a Child

The death and loss of a child is frequently called the ultimate tragedy. Nothing can be more devastating. Along with the usual symptoms and stages of grief, there are many issues that make parental bereavement particularly difficult to resolve. And this grief over the loss of a child can be exacerbated and complicated by feelings of injustice — the understandable feeling that this loss never should have happened. During the early days of grieving, most parents experience excruciating pain, alternating with numbness — a dichotomy that may persist for months or longer. Many parents who have lost their son or daughter report they feel that they can only “exist” and every motion or need beyond that seems nearly impossible. It has been said that coping with the death and loss of a child requires some of the hardest work one will ever have to do.

The relationship between parents and their children is among the most intense in life. Much of parenting centers on providing and doing for children, even after they have grown up and left home. A child’s death robs you of the ability to carry out your parenting role as you have imagined it, as it is “supposed” to be. You may feel an overwhelming sense of failure for no longer being able to care for and protect your child, duties that you expected to fulfill for many years.

It must be remembered that bereaved parents can mourn the death and loss of a child of any age, and that it feels unnatural to outlive a child. It does not make a difference whether your child is three or thirty-three when your son or daughter dies. The emotion is the same. All bereaved parents lose a part of themselves.

The search for meaning in a child’s death is especially important to parents. An understanding of how a death fits into the scheme of life is difficult and often unattainable. Faith is a source of comfort for some parents, but others with religious beliefs report feeling betrayed by God. Religious confusion is normal, as is questioning many things that you may have believed to be certain. One father dealing with the death of a child reported that his faith in life in general had been shattered. He had long believed that if you lived your life as a good person, striving to make a positive contribution to the world, life would turn out well. The death of his son robbed him of that belief. This reaction isn’t uncommon; losing a child feels like the ultimate violation of the rules of life.

Surviving the death and loss of a child takes a dedication to life. As a parent, you gave birth to life as a promise to the future. Now you must make a new commitment to living, as hard or

impossible as it may seem right now. You will survive this; however, the experience may change you.

As mentioned in the main [Understanding Grief](#) section, your grief will be individual and unique. How you grieve over the death and loss of a child and for how long will be different than for anyone else — you need to allow yourself to grieve in your own way.

Other topics that may be useful to you include the [Mourner's Bill of Rights](#), as well as [Suffering a Miscarriage or Losing a Child](#) and the recommended readings to the right and the related links to the left.

Common responses to a child's death

Shock: After the death and loss of a child you may initially feel numb, which is your mind's way of shielding you from the pain.

Denial: Your child can't be dead. You expect to see your son or daughter walk through the door, or to hear a cry on the baby monitor.

Replay: After the death and loss of a child your mind may center on the “what if's” as you play out scenarios in which your child could have been saved.

Yearning: Many parents report praying obsessively to have even five more minutes with their child so they can tell them how much they love them.

Confusion: After the death and loss of a child your memory may become clouded. You may find yourself driving and not remembering where you're going. Because your mind is trying to process such a huge shock, normal memory functions can be precluded, putting you in a “haze.” You may at times even question your sanity, though you are not crazy. Your pain is affecting your emotional and psychological systems at an extreme level — a sense of being on overload is common.

Guilt: Guilt appears to be one of the most common responses to dealing with the death of a child. Parents often mentally replay their actions prior to the death and wonder what they may have done differently.

Powerlessness: In addition to feelings of guilt, parents often have a sense of powerlessness that is attributed to feeling that they were not able to protect their child from harm.

Anger: Anger and frustration are also feelings reported by most parents and are common to grief in general. If your child's death was accidental, these emotions may be intensified. You may also be angry that life seems to go on for others — as if nothing has happened.

Loss of hope: After the death and loss of a child you are grieving not only for your child, but also for the loss of your hopes, dreams and expectations for that child. Time will not necessarily provide relief from this aspect of grief. Parents often experience an upsurge of grief at the time they would have expected their child to start school, graduate, get married, etc. Parents are rarely prepared for these triggers and the wave of grief they bring. Be aware of these triggers, and allow yourself to grieve. This is a normal, appropriate and necessary part of the healing process.

How the death of a child affects a marriage

Studies have shown that the death and loss of a child will not necessarily strengthen a marriage, and in fact the grief can sometimes lead to its demise. Each partner becomes deeply involved in his or her own grief and is often dissatisfied with the quality or depth of their

spouse's grief. When coupled with the anger, frustration, guilt and blame that often surround a child's death, parental bereavement can be a time of extreme volatility in a marriage. It's extremely important that each spouse understands the importance of communication (sharing of feelings), and just as one should not judge themselves for their reaction to the loss, they should not judge their spouse.

No two people grieve alike, so there is wide range of differences in the expression of grief. Any of these differences may cause spouses or partners to erroneously conclude that their mate has rejected them or feels "less." A bereaved couple may find it impossible to give comfort to each other when both are feeling an equal grief. Each partner may expect too much and receive too little. This unfortunate combination can create a chasm in a relationship, but it can be avoided if each accepts that you both are deeply hurt. Many of the reactions and stresses you are feeling result from your pain, not from something lacking in your relationship.

However, it is not true that most couples divorce after the loss of child. Recent studies offer some hope, showing that a much lower rate of divorces – only 12–16% – are related to the loss of a child. Perhaps with more of an understanding about grief, there will be even fewer.

How surviving children are affected

One of the most difficult roles for a mother or father after the death and loss of a child is to continue being a parent to the surviving children. Parents must continue to function in the very role they are grieving – an enormous challenge. But the surviving child or children shouldn't feel that they are alone or have been set aside, as difficult as it may be to find the emotional reserves to support them. Parents have the difficult task of switching roles constantly, from being comforted to being the comforter, at a time when they have little ability to do so. Some parents swing to the other extreme and become extremely overprotective of their child, determined to keep them safe.

To learn more about how to support your surviving child/children during this challenging time, please visit the [Children and Grief](#) section. Children of all ages process grief differently. To ensure the healthy survival of your family, your children's needs must be addressed not only by you but other family members who may have greater emotional reserves at this time. Others can help you help your child; you are critical to their healing process, but not the sole provider of comfort.

Pregnancy loss and infant death

When a baby dies before it is born or soon after birth, parents face a difficult emotional task: they must try to say goodbye to someone they had little chance to know. They must accept that a life has ended, even though it barely began. Just as with any death and loss of a child, you are likely to experience some of the more common symptoms of grief – you may go into shock or even deny that your baby has died. Depression, anger, frustration and other painful emotions are normal and to be expected. And even if you are normally a committed, caring person, you may find that you don't care about anything or anyone right now. As noted earlier, for many parents this time is simply one of existence and survival and very little more. There are two normal reactions to death that you will probably experience very acutely after losing a baby before or shortly after birth: anger and guilt. Because a baby's death seems so unnatural,

there is an especially strong urge to blame someone. You may be very angry with your doctor, hospital or — if you are a believer — God.

Guilt is a common reaction to the death and loss of a child, and can be particularly acute for parents who lose an infant or an unborn baby. Parents of unborn babies who die often mistakenly blame themselves for the death. The mother may believe she harmed her baby. Both parents may tell themselves they should have sensed something was wrong and alerted their doctor. While this is a normal reaction and must be processed, eventually you must find compassion for yourself and realize that this was not your fault. You were not responsible. Knowing that it was not in your control has both an upside and a downside: you cannot blame yourself, but you may also have an increased sense of powerlessness. Getting through this is part of the process.

Many parents feel overcome by a tremendous sense of emptiness. Pregnancy brings with it a number of expectations, dreams and fantasies – you spend months planning not just the birth of your child, but also his or her life in all the years to come. Now, just as both parents are emotionally preparing to welcome a child into the world, you must instead accept the loss of both the baby and all of your expectations for their future.

For parents of infants, you will have a different set of triggers and potentially painful situations in the months following your baby's death. Your home may be filled with baby clothes, bottles and a crib. If you registered with any new mother websites or infant sites, subscribed to any magazines or registered for a shower, you are likely to receive coupons for baby food or formula and more in the mail. A baby magazine may show up as a trial subscription. Photographers may call and offer to take baby pictures. Just walking past the infant-wear department in a store may initiate tears of mourning.

After the death and loss of a child it may be difficult to resolve the grief you feel for the baby you lost. Even before you can accept your baby's death, you must accept his or her life — their existence as a person. Remember, no matter how brief your baby's life, you have just as much right to grieve as any other bereaved parent.

Published articles that may be useful include [Suffering a Miscarriage or Losing a Child](#), [Coping with Pregnancy Loss and Infant Death](#), [In Honor of Pregnancy and Infant Loss Remembrance Day](#).

Ways to cope with parental grief” open

In our Understanding Grief section, you can find a list of ways to cope with grief. Below, you'll find some ideas that are more closely related to parental grief after the death and loss of a child. The resolution of parental grief may seem like an overwhelming task, but it is possible. It's important to be both realistic and optimistic — you will never get over the death and loss of your child. But you will survive it, even as you are changed by it. You will never forget your child or his or her death. As you go through each holiday, each season, each happy and sad occasion that may trigger another wave of grief, you will gain greater strength and better tools for coping with the pain.

Don't hide from your guilt: After the death and loss of a child you have feelings of guilt – which are common but not always present — confront and admit them. Examine the reality of how your child died and your actual intentions and actions at the time. You may see your actions or reactions in a more positive light. Forgive yourself for being imperfect — you did and continue to do the best that you can.

Accept happiness: After the death and loss of a child one of the major hurdles parents experience in their return to the world of the living is their inability to accept pleasure — or acknowledging that it even exists. But happiness or enjoyment is one of the most important survival tools, even if for just a moment in your grief. It's okay to laugh in the midst of tears, to smile at someone or something. You might feel that your laughter betrays your child's memory, but you need to know you are not abandoning your grieving by enjoying yourself. The only way to survive bereavement is to step away from it occasionally.

Take small steps: After the death and loss of a child it is important to break down the future into small increments, an hour or a day, and deal only with one portion at a time. Focus on tasks — feed the cat, do the laundry. These little bits of normalcy and focusing on the moment at hand will make grief more bearable.

Remember the positive: Focus on the positive events and experiences in the relationship you had with your child. At some point, consider making a journal of all the details you want to remember about your child's life. Review your family photographs and include some in your book. You may not feel ready to do this right away or you may take great comfort doing this in the early days — each person is individual in his or her needs.

Let others know your needs: After the death and loss of a child many people want to be supportive but are at a loss for what to do — they are unable to process this loss or know exactly what to say. Bereaved parents may have to be the ones to take the first step in reaching out to others. Let friends and family know your needs, and don't be afraid to ask for help. If you're afraid of running into someone who might say something about your child, ask a friend to do some shopping for you. Others could help you deal with daily tasks. Maybe you'd like someone to be available to listen to you or be around to ease your loneliness. Only you know what you need.

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HealGrief.org

Recommended Reading

[Empty Arms: Coping After Miscarriage, Stillbirth and Infant Death](#)

Sherokey Ilse

[Free to Grieve: Healing and Encouragement for Those Who Have Suffered Miscarriage and Stillbirth](#)

Maureen Rank

[When the Bough Breaks: Forever After the Death of a Son or Daughter](#)

Judith R. Bernstein, Ph.D.

Creating a New Normal... After the Death of a Child

Sandy Fox

The Death of a Child: Reflections for Grieving Parents

Elaine E. Stillwell