Grieving the Loss of a Child

This section has been reviewed and approved by the Cancer.Net Editorial Board [1], July / 2013

Key Messages:

- No parent is prepared for a child?s death, even if you have anticipated it during your child?s illness.
- People have different reactions and feelings after the death of a child and may grieve the loss in different ways.
- Grief may come and go in waves throughout your life.
- Although it seems impossible, you can eventually let the loss become part of who you are and go on to find happiness in life again.

The loss of a child is difficult. Parents are simply not supposed to outlive their children and no parent is prepared for a child's death.

It is important to remember that how long your child lived does not determine the size of your loss. Parents are intimately involved in the daily lives of young children, and death changes every aspect of family life, often leaving an enormous emptiness. The death of an older child or adolescent is difficult because children at this age are beginning to reach their potential and become independent individuals. When an adult child dies, you not only lose a child, but often a close friend, a link to grandchildren, and an irreplaceable source of emotional and practical support. 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.

In addition to grieving the loss of your child, you may find that you grieve the loss of the hopes and dreams you had for your child, as well as the potential that will never be realized and the experiences you will never share. 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 following the death of a child are similar to those after other losses, but 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 ? you may feel that you have failed as your child's protector and dwell on what you could have done 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
- Feelings of 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 loss of faith or spiritual beliefs ? assumptions about the world and how things should be do not fit with the reality of your child's death
- Dreaming about your child or feeling your child's presence nearby
- Feeling intense loneliness and isolation, even when with other people. You may feel that the magnitude of your loss separates you from others and that no one can truly understand how you feel

Although grief is always profound when a child dies, some parents have an especially difficult time. For these parents, even as time passes, the grief remains intense, and they feel it is impossible to return to normal life. Some parents may even think about hurting themselves as a way to escape from the pain. Even for parents with this most severe form of grief, however, there can be a way forward. If you believe you may be one of these parents, talk with a professional who can help you, such as a doctor or counselor [2].

Learn more about common reactions togrief and loss [3].

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 gradually become less intense and less frequent, but it is likely that you will always have feelings of sadness and loss.

Important events and milestones in the lives of other children can trigger grief even years after your child's death. 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 he or she were 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 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, to be strong, and to take charge of the family. Women may be expected to cry openly and to 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. It is important for you both to talk openly about your grief and for both of you to understand and accept the other's coping style.

Helping siblings who are grieving

Parents are the focus of attention when a child dies and the grief of siblings is sometimes overlooked. The death of a sibling is a tremendous loss for a child ? they lose a family member, a confidant, and a life-long friend. When your child developed cancer, you were likely completely focused on the needs of your sick child and can be overwhelmed with your own grief when your child dies. Your surviving children may misinterpret your grief as a message that they are not as valued as much as the sibling who died. You can help your children during this time of grief by:

- Making grief a shared family experience and including children in discussions about memorial plans.
- Spending as much time as possible with your children, such as talking about their sibling, just playing together, or doing something enjoyable.
- Making sure they understand that they are not responsible for their sibling?s death and help them let go of regrets and guilt.
- Never compare siblings to your child who died and make sure children know that you don't expect them to ?fill in? for him or her.
- Set reasonable limits on their behavior, but try not to be either overprotective or overly permissive. It is normal to feel protective of surviving children.
- Ask a close family member or friend to spend extra time with siblings if your own grief prevents you from giving them the attention they need.

Learn more about how tohelp a child or teenager who is grieving [4] andhow to cope with losing a sibling to cancer [5].

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 taking care of 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[6].

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 compel you to rethink your priorities and reexamine the meaning of life. It may seem impossible, but you can go on to find happiness and purpose in life again. For some parents, an important step may be to create 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 re-engage in life and to find pleasure in 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 look to 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.

More Information

Support Groups [7]

Cancer and Siblings [8]

Making a Difference [9]

Additional Resources

Bereaved Parents of the USA[10]

The Compassionate Friends [11]

BabySteps [12]

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/about-us
[2] http://www.cancer.net/node/24699
[3] http://www.cancer.net/node/25293
[4] http://www.cancer.net/node/25290
[5] http://www.cancer.net/node/24557
[6] http://www.cancer.net/node/25289
[7] http://www.cancer.net/node/25383
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[10] http://www.bereavedparentsusa.org/
[11] http://www.compassionatefriends.org/
[12] http://www.babysteps.com/