

FOR PARENTS: UNDERSTANDING THE GRIEVING PROCESS

Losing a child forever changes the life of a parent, and while the wounds left by such a tragedy never fully heal, understanding and growing through the grief process can help you cope with the painful emotions associated with this tragedy.

Many psychologists and grief counselors often discuss the “five stages of grief,” and recognizing what they are and how you may experience them can help you address your feelings:

- The first stage of grief is marked by **denial** and shock at the loss of a loved one. You may wonder why such a tragedy occurred and how you can possibly move forward with your life. This is a natural response to loss that helps you process emotions.
- As you accept the reality of your loss, you may also experience **anger** and frustration with others and yourself. Often, this anger is caused by the pain of feeling lost or alone, and while your grief may at times seem endless, emotions like anger and sadness are active signs of the deep love you experienced for your child.
- Anger often leads to feelings of **hopelessness** where you begin to question why and how a tragedy occurred. This stage of grief is marked by reflections on the “What ifs” and “If onlys” associated with your loss. While these feelings can linger for quite some time, understanding that they are a natural response to pain will help you recognize that grief is not about assessing blame but rather about living in and through the memory of your loved one.
- **Depression**, the next stage of grief, moves you beyond thinking about the past and into a true acceptance of your loss. The realization that your loved one is gone can leave you feeling empty and heartbroken. This, too, however is a reminder of the depth of your love and a natural step towards growth and healing.
- In the final stage of grief, you learn that it is OK to feel sad, lost and confused in the wake of a tragedy — this is what grief is all about! Recognizing the sincerity of these feelings comes with **accepting** that death does not bring an end to your love nor to the memory of your child. Both will continue to grow and evolve as you adjust to and embrace a new reality that is different but still meaningful.

Coping with Loss

While everyone grieves differently, the following tips and recommendations will help you to cope with some of the more challenging experiences associated with bereavement:

- Recognize that grief can be experienced in many different ways – socially, spiritually and even physically. Pay attention to your body’s natural response to grief but don’t be afraid to seek the help you need, especially if your health and well-being begin to deteriorate.
- Learning to live with the loss of a child affects you personally but it can also impact your relationships with others. When you feel comfortable doing so — and to the extent that you want to and can — share your feelings and concerns with your friends and family.
- Accepting encouragement and support from friends and family can be a tremendous source of strength and encouragement. It’s important to remember, however, that the difficulties of fully understanding your loss may lead others to say or do the “wrong thing” for the “right reason.” Try not to let the well-intentioned mistakes of friends and family cause you pain or anger. Remember, they are also struggling to make sense of this new reality.
- Consider joining a grief support group with individuals who have experienced similar tragedies and understand the unique pain and sorrow you now face. Doing so will allow you to open up

and share your feelings in a safe space where your feelings can be acknowledged and supported among friends.

- If you feel more comfortable sharing your feelings privately, consider speaking to a therapist, psychologist, counselor, cleric or friend who can give you the professional support you need to work through the grieving process.
 - There are a number of grief support guides and books that may help you to understand the unique difficulties of coping with the death of a child as a parent. Some examples include:
 - *Does the Soul Survive?*, by Elie Kaplan Spitz (ISBN 1580231659)
 - *I Wasn't Ready to Say Goodbye: Surviving, Coping and Healing After the Sudden Death of a Loved One*, by Brook Noel and Pamela Blair, Ph.D (ISBN 1402212216)
 - *Children Die Too*, by Joy and Marv Johnson (ISBN 1561230294)
 - *The Colors of Grief: Understanding a Child's Journey through Loss from Birth to Adulthood*, by Janis DiCiacco (ISBN 1843108860)
 - *After the Death of a Child - Living with Loss Through The Years*, by Ann K. Finkbeiner (ISBN 0-8018-5914-X)
 - *Understanding Your Grief: Ten Essential Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing Your Heart*, by Alan D. Wolfelt, PH. D. (ISBN 978-1-879651-35-7)
- Though grief can at times be overwhelming, try to maintain a sense of structure and purpose by remaining active. Identify activities that you enjoy — even for short periods at a time — that will give you a reason to get out of bed. Consider channeling your grief and emotions creatively through writing, painting or music. Volunteering with meaningful organizations is also a wonderful way to commemorate the memory of your child while also building a support network of other families who understand what you have experienced.
- Be prepared for tough questions. Just as you will wrestle with difficult issues as you process your grief, so too will your friends, family and even acquaintances who want to know more about what happened and how you are coping.
 - Even a seemingly mild question from a stranger or acquaintance like “How many kids do you have?” or “Who is your oldest child?” can throw you for a loop. Know that you will be asked these types of questions and reflect beforehand on how you feel most comfortable responding.
- Be aware that those around you may be afraid to use colloquial phrases like “I’m dying” or “I’m going to kill you.” Remember that these expressions are certainly not meant to cause you pain.
- Remember that you will probably experience a heightened sense of pain and loss during milestones like birthdays, holidays, family gatherings, the anniversary of your child’s death, or even the first day of school. Having a plan for these days and creating new rituals can help alleviate some of the anxiety with those milestones. Create commemorations and memorials — if and when you feel comfortable doing so.
- Life will go on. This may be impossible to grasp at first. Eventually, after the tremendous pain of acute grief subsides and you gradually come to terms with the permanence of your loss, you will move forward. Life will never be the same, but you must remember, it can still be good. Try to allow yourself to enjoy experiences that make you happy without feeling guilty. Your happiness was an essential part of your relationship with your child; continue to embrace what makes you *you*. Your child would want for you to be happy again and enjoy life.

- As time passes, distance can and will make your grief easier to manage. At the same time, however, you may also feel like you are moving further and further away from your child. Remember, nothing — including death — will ever diminish the love you and your child share. You were, are and will always be a loving and devoted parent.