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As a parent, we all feel like we are supposed to be perfect, acting as providers, protectors and in control in all situations. When a parent loses a child, many times we can feel like a failure, as if we could have controlled the situation. This is just not true. No one can see the future and no one can plan for absolutely everything.

GRIEF SUPPORT FOR PARENTS WHEN DEALING WITH THE DEATH OF A CHILD

When a child dies, parents begin the long process of bereavement. Many times, parents who have lost a child may experience denial, numbness and shock. As these emotions wear off, guilt, anger, despair and sadness usually set in. All of these feelings are part of what is known as grief. Unfortunately, many times this grief may become overwhelming.

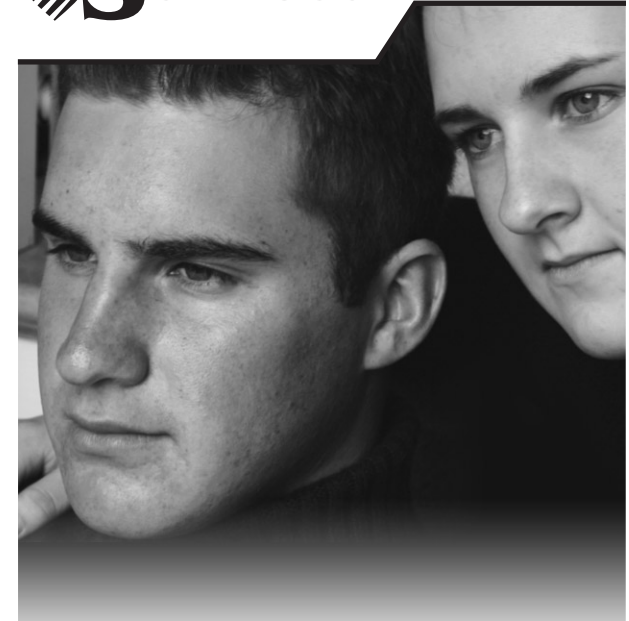
THE VARIOUS ASPECTS OF GRIEF

Emotional aspects of grief may go through many stages, levels and phases. One moment the parent may be feeling almost back to normal and the next moment feel deep levels of anguish and pain. These swings in emotion may last months or years. Be patient with yourself and allow yourself time. You and your spouse most likely have different timelines in how the bereaving process will occur and how long it will last. Try to understand you are both suffering and be tolerant as to how the other may approach or handle their situation.



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THE DEATH OF A CHILD PARENTS' GRIEF

Some of the common emotions experienced by bereaved parents include but are not limited to the following:

- **Guilt:** Guilt, whether real or imagined, is normal. The feeling that if only something had been different, the child might have lived, is common. By learning to express and share this feeling with other bereaved parents, eventually you may forgive yourself, understanding that no one can foresee the future.
- **Despair:** Despair and loneliness are common. Even when you are with a group of people, you may feel alone. Few people can understand how deeply a bereaved parent hurts unless they have been there.
- **Anger:** Anger often emerges, sometimes aimed at a person imagined to have caused the death, at others who cannot understand your feelings, at God, even at the very child who died.
- **To be with the child even in death:** A wish to join the child who died is natural.

MOVING ON AFTER A CHILD'S DEATH

Most parents feel they have nothing to live for and want a way out of the pain. The pain does lessen. Be assured that a sense of purpose and meaning does return. In the meantime, allow yourself the opportunity to grieve.

Priorities may change after the death of a child. Allow these changes as long as they are positive ones, but try to avoid the damaging ones such as turning to drugs or alcohol. If you need time off work, make arrangements to do so.

WARNING SIGNS THAT GRIEF MAY HAVE BECOME PROBLEMATIC

There are times when grief can become problematic, and

rather than a healing and growing experience, prolonged grief can lead to serious problems. Here are some signs that grief has become a problem and that the person may need some professional help from a grief support counselor or program. Each of these signs are elements of a healthy grieving process, except the intensity, elapsed time and degree of behavior are elevated above a level to where there is a risk to health, life, functioning or goal attainment.

- Minimal or total lack of emotional expression regarding the loss
- Prolonged inability to recognize that the loss has occurred
- Extreme reactions of grief, usually anger or guilt, that persist over time
- Marked or gradual change in health status
- Prolonged depression with tension, agitation, insomnia and feelings of worthlessness and self blame
- Over activity without a sense of loss

FINDING PROFESSIONAL HELP AND SUPPORT WHEN THE GRIEF IS TOO MUCH

One of the biggest problems in getting help is the person that is grieving may not admit that they are in need of help. Many people feel inadequate or weak if they are unable to handle situations themselves.

Asking for help when grief is complicated is not a sign of weakness. Instead, it is a sign of courage and strength. Remember, courage is not the lack of fear, but the willingness to act in its presence. If you or someone you care about needs encouragement or support in dealing with grief related to death, do not hesitate to contact Victim Services to help with a referral.

SUGGESTIONS FOR GRIEVING PARENTS:

- 1) Seek and accept support. You need acceptance and caring throughout.
- 2) Accept your grief. To work through it you must accept and deal with it. It is a natural healing process.
- 3) Find models. Look for someone who can give you hope that survival and growth are possible. Books and support groups may be good places to begin.
- 4) Learn about grief. Understanding grief can make it safer and more predictable.
- 5) Express it. Without expression grief can leave you frozen and stoic. Find someone who can listen to your story, or use music, art or journal writing etc.
- 6) Accept your feelings. Grief has many feelings; some very intense. Accept them and they will help you learn about yourself and the meaning of your loss. If you lock them inside you will lock away parts of yourself.
- 7) Pace yourself. Grief takes energy. You may tire easily. Alternating the pace with diversions or mild exercise. Good nutrition will help.
- 8) Involve yourself in work or meaningful activity. It can help you maintain direction, control and purpose, and occupy your mind.
- 9) Don't be afraid to have fun. Laughter helps healing. Allow yourself opportunities for diversion and freshness. Children and pets are great providers of healing.
- 10) Hitch your wagon to a star. You've got to have hope. Faith is not the absence of fear, but the willingness to go on when fear is present. Healing will come eventually.