

Death of a Child

It has been said that parents who lose a child also lose the hopes, dreams, and expectations they had for that child. They lose a part of themselves. They lose their future because their child represents their sense of ongoing life. Psychologists believe, because of these reasons, the death of a child is possibly the most difficult loss of all to accept.

People who have children often feel that parenting is life's most important role, regardless of the child's age. Therefore, the death of a child can be a tremendous assault on a parent's very identity.

What to Expect

If your child has died, you will most likely experience several common reactions of bereavement. However, your grief can be more acute than normal. You may go into periods of shock and denial. You will likely become depressed. If you are normally a committed, caring person, you could find that you do not care about anything or anyone. You may find yourself preoccupied with the circumstances of your child's death, recreating them over and over again in your mind. You may think you see or hear your child. You might have dreams and nightmares about them.

The intense grief caused by your child's death can take a physical toll as well. You may lose weight, have difficulty sleeping, become irritable or listless, or feel short of breath. Grief has even been known to cause hair loss.

Anger and Guilt

Perhaps the most acute feelings you will experience are **anger** and **guilt**. Because the death of a child does not follow the normal order of nature, there is a strong urge to place the blame on someone or something. You may be angry at the doctors or nurses who could not cure your child's illness, or at God for "letting" your child die. If your child died because of a traumatic accident, you may be angry at

whomever you believe caused it. If your child's actions partly caused the death, you may be angry at him or her and then feel guilty about your anger toward your child.

Parents often feel terribly guilty for simply living. If you had an argument with your child or had to discipline him or her shortly before the death, you may feel guilty for those actions.

You may feel the most guilt because you believe you should have prevented your child's death. You may find yourself consumed by thoughts of "if only."

A father tends to suffer guilt over failing to prevent a child's death. While both parents feel responsible for their child's safety, men have often been taught that protecting the family is their primary role.

The Grief Experience

While bereaved parents know they will experience intense grief, their child's death can have another effect they did not anticipate. The death could alter their feelings toward each other. Almost always, the marriage will never be the same. The change could be for the better or for the worse. However, the relationship rarely stays the same.

Parents think their grief will be similar because they have lost the same child. This similar type of mourning rarely happens. The relationship the father mourns is different from the relationship the mother mourns because each parent shared a different relationship with the child.

Fathers may have a more difficult time expressing their grief, believing on some level that "big boys don't cry," or that they need to be strong for their surviving family. Unfortunately, this may keep fathers from working through their grief and resolving it. It may become necessary to seek counseling or spiritual help.

Couples may experience difficulty in communicating after the death of their child. The intensity of grief comes at different times for each

parent. One parent may use work as an escape while the other finds solace in photo albums and home videos. Dad may feel the need to box up and store the child's personal belongings while Mom cannot bear to look at them. A physical resemblance to the dead child can also cause difficulties between the parents.

A child's death may cause sexual problems within a marriage as well. Time, patience, and communication are key elements to resolving these problems. It is not uncommon for these effects to last up to two years or more following the child's death.

Answering the Questions of Your Other Children

Your other children will look to you to explain the death to them. A child's questions will depend on their age, but your answers should always be honest. Guard against telling children that their brother or sister is "sleeping," or that "God wanted their brother or sister." These may simply cause other fears in your children that may be more difficult to resolve than a more direct answer. Be direct, without offering more information than necessary.

Young children sometimes fantasize that they caused the death by being mean to the deceased sibling or by fighting with them. In this case, it is important to assure your child that he/she had nothing to do with their brother's or sister's death.

Remember, your other children need to resolve their grief. They will take their cues from you, so support them in their grief by being open in showing yours. You will not do them any favors by protecting them from the grieving process; in fact, there is no way you can.

Dealing with Grief

It may not be possible to work through your grief alone. We can recommend support groups, counselors, books, and videos which deal specifically with child bereavement. Ask us to recommend a specific book, or visit your local library.

It is important for parents to realize that severe grief can make them feel like they're going crazy. If you are afraid your grief is out of control, you might consider asking your clergy, doctor, or funeral director to suggest a counselor. You may be relieved to find that your problems, in this situation, are normal.

Finally, remember that other people will likely feel very awkward around you because they will not know what to say. You can help bridge the gap by simply telling them what you need and letting them know if it is all right to mention your deceased child.