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The Death of a Child

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The Grief of the Parents: A Lifetime Journey

There is no more devastating loss than the death of a child. Losing a child to sudden death is a disruption in the natural law and order of life. It's heartbreak like no other. Parental grief is different from other losses – it is intensified, exaggerated, and lengthened.ⁱ

Grief is a process. Although you would wish otherwise, grief cannot be bypassed or hurried; it must be allowed to happen. As a parent, you do not go through grief and come out the other side as before the loss. Grief changes you.ⁱⁱ

Accepting the reality of the loss:

Embrace all your feelings and emotions. You're entitled to whatever feelings come up. You may experience intense anger, guilt, denial, sorrow and fear, all of which are normal for a bereaved parent.ⁱⁱⁱ

Working through the pain of grief:

It is necessary to acknowledge and work through the pain of grief, or it will manifest itself through some symptoms or atypical behaviour. Not everyone experiences the same intensity of pain or feels it in the same way, but it is impossible to lose someone with whom you had been deeply attached without experiencing some level of pain.

Many emotions such as shock, anger, guilt, and depression may be expressed. You need to allow yourself to indulge in the pain: to feel it and know that one day it will pass. Some say it is easier to express emotions with someone who knew the child or who can relate to the experience directly.^{iv}

Re-evaluate your relationships if they become hurtful:

It's not uncommon for friends to pull away during this grieving period. Some people simply do not know what to say, and those that are parents may feel uncomfortable with the reminder that the loss of a child is possible.

If friends urge you to "*get over*" your grief and try to hurry you through your grieving process, set boundaries with them regarding what is and isn't an acceptable topic for conversation. If necessary, distance yourself from those who insist on dictating your grieving process.^v

Ways that Help Parents Cope and Heal:

- Admitting to yourself that your grief can be overwhelming, unpredictable, painful, draining, and exhausting.
- Allowing yourself to be angry and acknowledging that you may feel helpless, vulnerable, and disoriented.
- Trying to understand that to grieve is to heal and integrating grief into your life is a necessity for now.
- Acknowledging the need and desire to talk about your child.
- Trying to be patient and forgiving with yourself, and others.
- Refraining from making hasty decisions.
- Counting on, confiding in, and trusting those who care, listen, and hear, those who will try to understand your emotional and physical limitations.
- Accepting that you are allowed to feel pleasure and continue to live your life, knowing your love transcends your child's death.^{vi}

^{i,ii,iv,vi} US Department of Health & Human Services, Health Resources & Services Administration. (n.d.). *The Death of a Child - The Grief of the Parents: A Lifetime Journey*.

^{iii,v} US Department of Health & Human Services, Health Resources & Services Administration, Maternal and Child Health Bureau, National Sudden Infant Death Syndrome/Infant Death Resource Center. (2005). *How to Survive the Death of Your Child*. McLean, Virginia, USA.



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