
Grief: Death of a Child

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The death of a child is an unexpected crisis that most parents rarely think about or expect to experience. Most people expect their parents and older extended family members to precede them in death but not their children. During these traumatic events, God has promised to be close to the brokenhearted (Psalms 34:18) and He heals their wounds (Psalms 147:3).

Understanding several principles about the healing and grieving process will better equip you to help yourself and others. Each of the following principles should be a consideration when a loss of a child occurs. The individual's healing occurs as he or she progresses through the grieving process. This process includes expressing emotions, saying goodbye, treasure memories, staying involved with friends and maintaining a spiritual lifeline.

1. There is no one-way to grieve. With the loss of a child, there are emotional, physical and spiritual difficulties that may surface and will need resolution. The effects of this loss will last far longer than most people expect. It is important to remember that it is normal and healthy to grieve; God tells us grief is stressful, and affects the body and the soul of each person, young or old. (Psalms 31:9).

2. Each person will grieve in his or her own unique way. You, your spouse and your family will experience and cope with the death in different ways. Be patient and non-judgmental with each other. God calls us to be kind and compassionate to others (Ephesians 4:32).

3. Healthy ways of expressing your grief are verbalizing your emotions and shedding tears. This releases the build-up of tension for parents and family. It's normal for men and boys to cry and no one is too old to cry, even Jesus wept (John 11:35). So cry when you feel the need. Don't hide all your tears from your family and friends. Show your children it is normal to cry and express emotions. Tears are a God-given expression that helps the healing process. Sharing your feelings with trusted friends, grief support groups or counselors is helpful. Remember also, the Scriptures tell us that during our sorrow if we cry out to God for help that He hears our voices (Psalms 18:6). God knows our pain, and we are not alone.

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4. Expect feelings of guilt and anger to surface during the process. Guilt (true or imagined) may surface in thoughts and feelings of "if only." To resolve the guilt, learn to express and share these feelings to trusted friends and family and through creative

expression such as journaling. Younger siblings may express themselves with art. In addition, you must learn to forgive yourself. As Jesus tells us to forgive others, we need to realize that includes ourselves (Mat 18:35).

Anger is another common reaction to death of a loved one. Anger as guilt needs expression and sharing in a healthy and acceptable manner. Find healthy outlets like physical activity to release the intense emotion.

5. You may physically react to your loss in several ways: loss of appetite or overeating, sleeplessness, and sexual difficulties. You may experience loss of energy and inability to concentrate. These are all normal reactions that many parents feel. God tells us that sorrow affects our strength both body and soul (Psalms 31:9). Remember that a balanced diet, rest and moderate exercise are important for the whole family during this stressful time

6. Avoid self-medicating with drugs and alcohol. Medication should be taken sparingly and only under the supervision of your physician. Many substances are not only addictive but also may stop or delay the necessary grieving process. Even though it is painful, try to work through the grieving process.

7. You may believe you have nothing to live for and may think about finding a release from this intense pain. Many people experiencing loss think this way, but keep in mind that sense of purpose and meaning will return. Pain will lessen as time goes by. Your remaining family needs you more than ever in this difficult time. God tells us to trust in Him and He will help us through our crisis (Pro 3:5).

8. Know that friends and relatives may be uncomfortable around you. They want to ease your pain but do not know how. Take the initiative and help them learn how to be supportive to you. Speak of your child, so others know this is appropriate. The decease will come up in conversations naturally because they were a part of your family.

9. If possible, postpone major decisions (moving, changing jobs, moving surviving children to a new school, daycare arrangement, etc.) for a least a year.

10. Avoid making hasty decisions about your child's belongings. Do not allow others to take over or to rush you. You can do it little by little whenever you think you are ready.

11. A child's death causes a parent to challenge and examine his faith. You may question old beliefs, don't allow this to disturb you. Share your thoughts and feelings with God as well as family and friends. For many, faith offers help to accept the unacceptable. Always remember God will never abandon you (Deuteronomy 31:6).

12. Holidays can be difficult. The anniversaries of your child's birth and death can be stressful times. Consider the feelings of the entire family in planning how to spend the day. Allow time and space for your own emotional needs.

13. Join a support group of parents with similar experiences. You will find sharing eases loneliness and promotes the expression of your grief in an atmosphere of acceptance and understanding.

14. Siblings and children are often the forgotten grievers within a family. They are experiencing many of the same emotions as adults, but they grieve in a different way. Include them by sharing your thoughts and tears with them. Sharing is not easy at times, but through this painful time each person needs to feel included and loved. Expect siblings to grieve differently from you or each other. They will likely need to take periodic breaks from sadness; they still need understanding and care but they are not equipped to grieve like an adult. Encourage physical activities, sports and creative expression as ways to release their intense feelings.

15. Maintain your spiritual lifeline. Read the Bible, pray telling God how you honest emotions and listen for His answers. As we are taught in Scriptures to pray for our daily needs (Matthew 6:11), we also need to ask for our emotional, physical and spiritual needs.

16. Bereaved parents and their families can find healing and hope for the future as they reorganize their lives in a positive way. Find a way to minister to others, especially those that are grieving. One of the best ways to overcome grief is to transform your pain into help and healing of others. God gives us comfort and compassion and we in turn are to share it with to others (2 Corinthians 1:3-5).

Above all, remember grief is a process not an event and no one can shortcut the healing process. God knows the pain and grief we are suffering. He wants us to call upon Him and He will help us with our troubles (Psalms 50:15).