

Grieving the Loss of a Child

We never expect to outlive our children. It's not the natural order of things. We expect to watch them grow and learn and mature into adulthood. We even know that one day we will die and leave them behind. But we never expect that they will be the first to leave, and that we will somehow have to learn to live on without them.

The grief that follows the death of a child can be overwhelming. When a child dies parents often feel that a part of them has died, that a part of them has been ripped away. Parents may feel that they have failed at parenting, that they should somehow have been able to keep their child alive. The grief experience is very intense, with extreme feelings of sadness, anger, guilt, anxiety and despair. Often immediately following the death there is a period of shock and numbness, where one feels very little at all. There can be physical responses to grief as well, fatigue, loss of appetite, or sleep disturbance, along with mental responses such as difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness, or a lack of interest in the world around you. It can be a roller coaster of emotions with a seemingly infinite series of ups and downs.

Grief is a different experience for each person, and different for each loss a person experiences. These individual differences in grief can be difficult when a family loses a child, with each person in the family grieving in a unique way. It is important to remember that there is no "right" way to grieve, and that every person's needs and feelings are equally valid. In many families there are certain individuals who act as the "rock" of the family and are expected to stay strong during times of turmoil. After experiencing a loss, each person in the family needs a chance to grieve, even the family "rock" It is important for every family member to have permission to express their grief, to make their needs known and to get support. While the grieving family can draw some comfort and support from one another during this difficult time, family members may also find it helpful to also seek support from outside the family.

Parents grieve not only for the child they lost but for the child's future, for all the hopes and plans that will never come to pass. In that way parents continue to grieve their child for the rest of their lives, thinking in each passing year about what their child would be like now, the milestones they would have reached, the birthdays, graduations and weddings that will never be. While it may seem to outsiders that the child is gone, the child will always hold a place in their family. Others may expect a bereaved parent to "move on," to "get over it." Even a simple question such as "How many children do you have?" can become difficult to answer. A parent who loses a child is still that child's parent, but that concept might be difficult for others to understand.

To say that bereaved parents will grieve forever does not mean that they will always be in intense pain. It does get better. Though bereaved parents will always carry with them the scars of their loss, healing does occur. With time and patience and a willingness to let yourself grieve, the overwhelming and incapacitating pain begins to subside. Eventually you find yourself smiling again, starting to enjoy life around you. This doesn't mean that the child is being forgotten, only that his parents have come to a place where they can live again, continuing their relationship with their child as a memory rather than a physical presence. As child loss specialists Horchler and Morris (1994) knowingly describe, "Bereaved parents will recover and reach a place of rest and hope... (They) will never forget [their child], but rather will find ways to keep (the child) a cherished part of (their) inner selves forever."