

Losing an Only Child

Bereavement may be even more devastating and complex when your only child dies. As bereaved parents, you face a lengthy and compounded mourning process that leaves you feeling bewildered, helpless and isolated. As you face each day, you wonder if anyone else has ever experienced such deep, raw emptiness.

The silence in your life that stems from being childless is overwhelming and the world feels desolate and senseless. These feelings may last for months or even years as you journey through grief. It is important to remember that most of the feelings you have are normal. Your dreams of hearing your child speak, seeing him or her walk or watching your child grow up, have ended, causing pain and uncertainty. But you will not always hurt as deeply as you hurt now.

Grief

Grief is complex and unpredictable; it cannot be avoided or hurried. Anguish is a typical and natural part of this experience just as numerous other difficult emotions (anger fear, loneliness, depression, jealousy) will surface and have to be dealt with. You may feel that your emotions overwhelm you at inappropriate times and possibly make you feel out of control. Jealousy and anger are emotions that many parents experience as they see others in what they perceive as “a complete” family. Even seeing a pregnant woman or hearing about the birth of a healthy baby will often send parents into a disturbing reaction. This is normal. Remember that each time you are truthful about your feelings and allow your pain to be released, you are leaving a little space for healing to enter.

Finding Balance

Balance is important in the healing process. Laughter, as well as tears, may aid in your recovery. It may take a long while to find moments of smiling or laughter, but when it happens, try to think of it as a brief period of relief with no need to feel guilty. It is often with other bereaved parents that you may feel safe and comfortable enough to express all of your emotions. Although there may be very few others who have lost an only child, it is still helpful to join a support group for bereaved parents to feel the caring they can offer you. At times, it may seem that even their stories are also very difficult to hear because they have other children at home. That is true; however, compassion is still a key element in healing. Bereaved parents will not encourage you to shut away your grief. No one has the power to take your pain away, but true compassion from other bereaved parents can soften some of the anguish you experience when you feel so distraught.

Questions from others

Soon you may face the dilemma of answering the question, “How many children do you have?” How you answer that question depends on your situation at the time. You may say, “My son or daughter died.” You may say, “None.” However, many parents feel guilty when they deny their child’s existence. Another possible answer is, “I had one daughter or son.” If the person asking the question is comfortable he or she may ask you to tell your story. When you are having a bad day and do not want to answer further questions, you might reply, “Thank you for caring enough to ask, but this has not been a good day for me. I’m not able to talk about it now but perhaps there will be a time when I’m able to say more.” What is important is to let your heart speak to you, and to recognize that each time the painful question arises, your answer may change - and that is perfectly fine. Just as your grief changes from moment to moment, your responses to people, questions, sights, sound and smells will also change. Loss is experienced in a myriad of unpredictable ways that have a profound impact on you. All you can do is respond to what is presented at each given moment.

Family and Friends

Well meaning family and friends may encourage you to focus on your future and find meaning in your life again. Although their intentions are good, you may feel angry at their prodding and lack of understanding, especially when life feels so empty. For those who have not experienced the death of a child it is impossible to understand the depth of your pain. They also see in you what they fear more than anything: a child's death. Losing your only child is beyond their comprehension. Therefore, they look for ways to end your suffering in hopes they do not have to imagine such an experience in their own lives. It is important to let them know your authentic feelings and the necessity of being true to yourself, even if it makes them uneasy. This is your personal journey that cannot be dictated by anyone else.

The Importance of Networking

Networking with another family who has lost an only child can be especially helpful to you. Ask your support group facilitator or nurse/counselor/social worker at a local hospital if there is someone who can be linked with you for phone support or perhaps informal meetings. Both families can be strengthened by these understanding and informative interactions.

Remembering Your Baby

Your baby can be commemorated in many ways:

- Donate to a meaningful cause in memory of your baby
- Create a memorial garden with a life-long quality in your yard, or plant a tree in a public park
- Have a quilt made with pieces of clothing that your baby was to wear
- Wear a remembrance of your baby as a pendant, pin, or carry a remembrance in your pocket.
- Establish a memorial fund in memory of your baby
- Donate books or something special to a school or charity of your choice
- Keep a remembrance of your baby in a visible place in your home (on a mantle, coffee table or in a curio cabinet): place a picture with a candle next to it, your baby's blanket, a special toy or stuffed animal. This will help others to understand that you did indeed have a baby that continues to be very much loved and remembered, and you still consider yourself to be a loving parent.
- End each day by "talking to your baby" about the experiences you've had that day. Thank your baby for the dreams he or she gave you, and always send your love.

Honor your baby's memory in ways that feel helpful and right for YOU.

Living Again

Facing life without your beloved baby can be frightening. Perhaps it seems that your reason for living has vanished and your dreams have been shattered. Gradually, you will see that, although your life with your baby has ended, a new and different life is waiting to be lived. First, you must grieve for as long as you need to grieve. When you are ready to take a step forward, you may not know what direction to take, and there is no need to hurry. Maybe you will follow several paths as you search for new goals and a new way to experience the world. Whatever you choose to do is fine. Listen to your heart. Keep your mind open and trust that at the right time you will live and love again. The memory of your baby will always be with you as you reinvest in life. His or her life as you knew it has ended, but the love continues to be a presence... forever.