Grieving the Loss of a Child

The loss of a child is the most devastating experience a parent can face-and missing the child never goes away. A piece of yourself is lost and your future is forever changed.

The age of the child at the time of death does not lessen the hurt or devastation. It feels completely unnatural for a child to die before his or her parents. However, over 57,000 children under the age of 19 die every year in the United States.

Many grieving parents question whether life will hold any meaning for them and wonder how they will survive the pain of their loss. Parents describe the feeling as having a hole in their heart that will never heal, and may blame themselves and ask, "If only I had." Or they may be angry with their spouse, the physician, God, or the government.

Parents feel alone and isolated in their grief, as friends and relatives are often at a loss as to what to say. But it is important to talk to people who understand the loss. This may be family, friends, clergy, therapists, or support groups.

Everyone suffers loss in different ways depending upon their beliefs, culture, family history, and relationship with the person who died. It doesn't mean that others care less if they mourn differently than you do. Grief can also vary greatly depending upon how the child died. While some losses are less visible, such as miscarriage, other experiences of loss are more traumatic, such as an accident, illness, murder or death during war.

Types of Loss

1. Miscarriage affects about 25 percent of women who become pregnant during their lifetime. The experience of pregnancy loss can be devastating to couples, yet the majority of women who miscarry become pregnant again soon after the loss. This can become emotionally and physically challenging for the couple. They are often plagued with concerns about the possibility of another miscarriage and whether they made an appropriate decision to conceive again.
2. Stillbirths, occurring in about 1% of pregnancies, can leave a feeling of disorientation, yearning and despair. Hospitals will give parents the option of spending time with the baby to say goodbye, and many parents have said that seeing their child was important for their grief process and enabled them to see the baby as a part of themselves. Another form of infant loss is Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS)-the most frequent cause of death in children under one year of age-that creates a profound void and sense of loss in the family.
3. Approximately 2,000 children are reported missing every day, and these kidnappings and cases of missing children cause parents almost unbearable pain. Not knowing whether a child is dead or alive results in confusion, fright and anxiety. When the bodies of kidnapped children are found, parents may express saddened relief that their children can now have a proper burial and healing can finally begin.
4. The parents of murder victims face many unique struggles in their process of bereavement. A sense of loss of control is common, and the suddenness of the death is so overwhelming that, for a period of time, parents are often incapable of processing through the grief. For this group, dealing with spiritual beliefs, attitudes toward life, and general physical health may hold special importance.
5. Each day, 46 children are diagnosed with cancer in the U.S., and 35% of those will die. Cancer remains the number one disease killer of children. The anguish and extreme pain parents experience begins with diagnosis. One part of the parents' heart hopes for a cure, while the other part begins the quiet process of impending grief.

Marital Stress and the Death of a Child

Parents often experience more anger, depression, guilt, and physical symptoms than those grieving other losses. Conflict can occur between the parents due to lack of understanding about each person's way of expressing grief. Marital problems, which were present before the child's death, can re-emerge, often with increased strength. Blaming can occur and the words that are said to each other in anger and grief can have a lifelong impact.

With time, the pain lessens and a different future is created. During the bereavement period, a wide array of emotions and symptoms can be experienced, such as denial, self-blame, sleeplessness, fatigue, anxiety and despair. These are all normal parts of the intense grieving process, and the intensity of feelings change as you move through bereavement.

How Can I Help Myself?

* Keep a journal; sometimes it is helpful to put down in words what you are feeling and thinking.
* Talk about your child, if you want to. Although it may be painful, it can help you heal.
* Take time to do a familiar activity with your family. This helps to provide stability when your world is feeling chaotic.
* Join a support group; parents often respond that becoming involved in bereavement groups helped them through their loss and with their relationship.
* Seek therapy when you, or others close to you, feel that your grief is becoming too difficult to bear, or is too prolonged.

What Types of Help Are Available?

1. Family Therapy: The death of a child touches everyone in the family and forever changes its landscape. Sadness, anger, and hopelessness are some of the emotions often felt by bereaved parents. Family therapists are specially trained to understand the profound impact of this loss on an individual and a family and can assist through a time of bereavement.
2. Support Groups: Support groups for bereaved parents offer a place to talk about your child, your loss, fears, anger, anxieties and other feelings. These groups also help parents learn from the experiences of others who have suffered the same or a similar type of loss. Several support groups provide services for other family members, such as siblings and grandparents. Contact one of the organizations listed below for information about group support in your area.

Written by Margo F. Weiss, PhD.

Resources

* [Bereaved Parents of the U.S.A.](http://www.bereavedparentsusa.org/) A self-help group that offers support, understanding, compassion and hope to bereaved parents, grandparents and siblings.
* [Candlelighters Childhood Cancer Foundation:](http://www.candlelighters.org/) Founded by parents of children with cancer, this group offers support to parents who have a child diagnosed with cancer and those whose child has died of cancer.
* [Compassionate Friends:](http://www.compassionatefriends.org/) An organization for bereaved parents, assisting families following the death of a child.
* [First Candle/SIDS Alliance:](http://www.firstcandle.org/) Support for families who have experienced miscarriage, stillbirth or sudden death of an infant.
* [Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD)](http://www.madd.orgnational/)
* [National Center for Missing and Exploited Children](http://www.missingkids.com/)
* [The National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization:](http://www.nhpco.org/) An organization representing palliative care and hospice programs and professionals in the U.S., committed to improving end-of-life care and increasing access to hospice care.
* [National Organization of Parents of Murdered Children](http://www.pomc.com/)
* [Birth Injury Guide](http://www.birthinjuryguide.org/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)