



# Parents and Grieving

**Grief is an intense, lonely and personal process. People do not expect the death of a child, and it can force you to face an event that you are not at all ready for.**

We all learn about grief throughout our lives, when we are separated from ones we love or when loved ones die. The death of an older relative or loved one is very sad, but we usually expect it. We do not expect the death of a child, especially when the child looks or seems healthy.

When a child dies, the death can destroy the dreams and the hopes of the parents. It can also force the family to face an event that they are not prepared for. Most parents who experience the death of a child describe the pain that follows as the most intense pain they have ever experienced. Many parents wonder if they will be able to stand the pain, to survive it, and to be able to feel that life has meaning again.

## **What can I expect during the grieving process?**

Knowing about what has helped other parents deal with their grief can sometimes help ease the intense pain that you might be experiencing. For example, one of the most important things for you to know is that recovery from the loss of a child takes time. Each person will have to find their own process for recovery. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. But it can help to know about how grief happens and how it resolves. It is also helpful to know that there is support available to family members. It is very important that you know that you are not alone and that other people have survived after the grief of losing a child.

Some of the first reactions a parent has after the death of a child are shock, disbelief, denial or numbness. These are typical reactions that can help parents cope better with their death over a period of time. Many parents have said that they seem to be doing things “in a fog” during the first few weeks after their child’s death. For some parents, being at their child’s wake or funeral feels like they are there watching from the outside, or not really involved or attached emotionally.

All of these reactions are nature’s way of helping parents confront the death of a child. These reactions may last minutes, hours, days or weeks. Over time and without being conscious of it, the parent will know when they are better able to face the death. Crying, or some similar emotional release, usually marks the end of this initial period of grief.

## **What can I expect from my family and friends?**

Even though the period of shock or numbness is normal, it might be hard for other people to understand or be supportive, especially if they have not grieved before. People might think that you are strong and are holding up well. They might also think that you are unable to talk about or deal with the loss. Other people do not always realize that it is an important part of dealing with a child’s death without losing control.

When the death becomes a reality to the family, intense suffering and pain usually begin. During the weeks and months that follow, many parents say that they are scared by the intensity and the range of the feelings that they have. Crying, weeping, and nonstop talking are all normal reactions, and they can help you to deal with your child's death. You may find that you feel very much alone.

Parents may express their grief in different ways, and you might have a hard time sharing your feelings with others who are grieving in your family. Relatives and friends may be busy with their own lives, may not be able to deal with the death, or may be unable to meet your need for comfort and support. Some parents can get help from clergy, healthcare providers, counselors, other parents whose child has died (bereaved parents) or willing friends and relatives. It is important to remember, though, that no one can resolve your grief but you. Resolution can be achieved only by experiencing and working through these emotions.

### **How can I cope with these feelings?**

It is important for you to let yourself express your feelings as you have them. It is vital not to hold in emotions until the "right time." There may be a lot of ways to express emotions, through words or in other ways. The important thing is to express the emotions when they come. Talking about them with other people who have grieved is also very important, and it can help a lot.

### **What kinds of reactions might I have?**

People react in a lot of different ways to grief. These are some of the feelings or reactions you might have:

#### **Guilt**

As you try to understand why your child has died, you may feel guilty. Some of the things that can happen:

You may blame yourself or others in your family for something they did or did not do.

"If only" becomes a common phrase. You may feel guilty thinking of all the things that you wish you had done with your child. You might feel guilty, for instance, for not spending enough time with your child, for deciding to go back to work or for not having given your child something that they wanted. Most of the time, these feeling will pass.

#### **Anger**

You may be angry after the death of your child. Depending on your personality, this can range from mild anger to rage. You might feel angry at yourself, at your family or partner, at your child's healthcare provider, or at the child for having died. You might question or doubt your faith or beliefs, and might feel angry with a God who allows children to die.

### To Learn More

- Journey Program  
206-987-2062
- [www.seattlechildrens.org](http://www.seattlechildrens.org)

### Free Interpreter Services

- In the hospital, ask your child's nurse.
- From outside the hospital, call the toll-free Family Interpreting Line 1-866-583-1527. Tell the interpreter the name or extension you need.
- For Deaf and hard of hearing callers 206-987-2280 (TTY)

These thoughts are normal, but they may make you feel upset or anxious. It is important for you not to hold in anger. It usually comes out in other ways, and may come out in places or at time that are not OK or appropriate. Anger can be expressed in healthy ways. Some examples of some good ways to work through anger are: screaming in private, hitting something in a way that does not hurt you or others or strenuous exercise.

### Fear

After the death of a child, you might feel afraid that something else horrible is going to happen. If there are other children in the family, you may become very overprotective of them.

After the death of a child, you may find it is hard to focus or concentrate. Your mind may wander, and it can be hard to read, write, or make choices. It can be hard to sleep, which can make you very tired and edgy during the day. You might still feel very tired or exhausted, even when you are able to sleep. You may feel fear in your body, around the heart or in your stomach or muscles. You might feel a very strong urge to escape. These reactions are all normal, but grieving parents often fear that they are “going crazy.”

### Depression

Sometimes, as parents continue to work through grief, depression often occurs. Depression can take different forms for different parents. You may feel constantly “down,” unhappy or sad. Or you may feel worthless or as though somehow you have failed. You might feel sluggish, tired or without energy. This may be a good time for you, with the help of family or friends, to get involved in some type of activity. Be careful to avoid activities that let you throw yourself into them completely. This can be like running away, and does not allow you to face the reality of the death.

Grieved parents in the midst of deep depression may feel that life has little meaning for them. Occasionally, thoughts of suicide may arise. Many parents say that thoughts of their child are constantly in the forefront of their minds. Aching arms, hearing the child cry, or continuing with routine tasks of caring for the child are all typical experiences for grieving parents.

As you begin to recover, depression will slowly lift. “Down” times will come and go, but the time between the “downs” will become longer. It's a long, slow process which may take years. But resolution and recovery will come.

Adapted from “Parents and the Grieving Process” from The Circle Solutions, Inc.

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Seattle Children's offers interpreter services for Deaf, hard of hearing or non-English speaking patients, family members and legal representatives free of charge. Seattle Children's will make this information available in alternate formats upon request. Call the Family Resource Center at 206-987-2201.

This handout has been reviewed by clinical staff at Seattle Children's. However, your child's needs are unique. Before you act or rely upon this information, please talk with your child's healthcare provider.

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