

Healing as a Single Parent

Your child's death is an experience that changes you forever—and as a single parent, you may have unique experiences and struggles as you grieve this loss. It is OK for you to cope in your own way and to take as long as you need. Here are some suggestions that may help you cope with your grief.

What can I expect as I grieve?

Grieving the death of your child is a lifelong process. The way you grieve may change over time. You may feel some of these or other feelings:

- Loneliness
- Emptiness
- Shock
- Anger
- Guilt
- Sadness
- Shame
- Despair
- Depression

It is normal to have big changes in your emotions when you grieve. Feelings that you have about the death of your child can be strong and sudden. Give yourself time to deal with these feelings as you experience them. These feelings may get more or less intense, as time passes.

It is common to feel alone or distant from people in your life as you grieve. As a single parent it may be hard to find someone with whom you can share the unique pain and feelings of losing a child. Even when you have other people around you, grief can be a lonely process, because only you can feel your pain.

You may feel like you need to feel close to friends and family. When you are in pain, it is normal to want extra touch and closeness. Ask for a hug when you need one. You may think about joining a support group or seeking spiritual support.

What are some ways to cope with grief?

Remember that your pain and loss is real. You are allowed to hurt. Grieve at your own pace and do not judge yourself for how you are grieving. Here is a list of things that may help you cope:

- Ask for help from trusted friends and family. As a grieving single parent, it is helpful if another adult can provide practical and emotional support in the early days of your child's death. You may need help with organizing and decision making. You may also need someone who can share the memories of your child with you.
 - Seek out support: support groups, professional counselors, or religious or spiritual support.
 - Prayer, meditation or attending a place of worship may bring spiritual comfort if it is helpful to you.
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To Learn More

- Journey Program
206-987-2062
- Ask your child's healthcare provider
- seattlechildrens.org

Free Interpreter Services

- In the hospital, ask your 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.

- Give yourself time to adjust to the loss, and be patient with yourself.
- You might want to do something in memory of your child, or start a new ritual to remember your child. Some suggestions:
 - Plant a tree, a bush or start a flower garden.
 - Burn a candle at special times, like at mealtime or before ending your day.
 - Visit a place that brings you loving memories of your child, like a park.
- It can be helpful to plan ahead for special days and anniversaries like Mother's Day, Father's Day, your child's birthday and their death date. It may be a good idea to decide ahead of time how you would like to spend those days and what will make them meaningful to you. You may decide to change your traditions or make up new ones. Sharing this with family and friends can help you through these painful days.
- Acknowledge your inner strength. Kelly Osmont, co-author of *Parting is Not Goodbye*, writes about the inner strength of single parents. She describes the strength that you need to parent alone as an important asset—a strength that you might not know you had without being alone. “Your special strength, plus the coping skills you've gained as a single parent, are valuable. You were strong enough to handle alone your job as parent; that knowledge can give you the courage you need to survive the grieving alone. And reaching out for others' support sometimes takes the most courage of all.”

Resources

- Alan Wolfelt, PhD, “Healing a Parent's Grieving Heart.” This book may be available at your local library or is available to buy online.

Information in this handout was adapted from Duke University Health System, Bereavement “Single Parent Grief – After the Loss of a Child”

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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