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When Parents Grieve

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FL 244

The death of a child, at any age or for any reason, is probably the most traumatic event that parents must endure. In this current society, with its medical advances, people expect to die in a predictable sequence. Simply put, parents should die before their children. When some tragic circumstance changes this order, parents are bewildered, not only by the overwhelming grief for the loss of the child, but also by the seeming unfairness of the death. The cause of the child's death does not seem to affect the amount of grief that parents experience over time. A child's death following a long illness appears to be just as difficult for parents as a death due to a sudden accident. Also, most parents grieve as intensely for a very young child as they grieve for an older child.

For bereaved parents, there is no "standard" grief period. Compared to all other crises, the recovery period following a child's death appears to take the longest amount of time. It is important for parents to understand that they are not abnormal if they experience periods of sadness and grief for many years afterward.

Common Experiences Following a Child's Death

When a child dies, parents are confronted with very intense emotions. They need to know what emotions to expect following a child's death and to understand that these feelings may affect their relationship with each other and with other family members.

It is very important to understand that men and women in this society often grieve in different ways. Because men are socialized in our culture to "be strong" and allow their family members to lean on them in times of trouble, they often seem to deny their most painful emotions. While attempting to help other family members, fathers may feel very isolated during their own time of grief. On the other hand, mothers may express emotions more openly and not understand if fathers seem less emotional. Some parents (either fathers or mothers) find comfort in discussing their deceased child frequently, while other parents prefer to talk very little about the child. These differences may be difficult for some parents to accept because they may interpret the differences to mean that one parent is more devastated by the loss than the other parent. The devastation is probably equal for both parents, but each one will cope with the loss in different ways. There is no right or wrong way to grieve for a dead child. However, for the sake of the marriage relationship, the couple must keep the lines of communication open and talk about their feelings. It is important to accept the other's feelings and affirm these feelings as legitimate ones, even when they seem hard to understand.

Listed below are some common experiences that parents may have following a child's death. Some suggestions are included for coping with grief responses.

Anger

Initially, many parents feel very angry. This anger may occur because the child's death seems so unfair and parents feel so helpless. The anger may be directed towards oneself, one's spouse, the medical profession, an outsider, or even God. Parents often look for someone to blame, even each other, so they can "make sense" out of a needless loss. When anger and blame can be openly expressed, they usually give way to the more rational feelings of loss and grief. It is best to acknowledge the anger one feels and try to determine the source of the anger rather than deny the feelings. Repressed anger may resurface later as depression. If talking about angry feelings with one's spouse is difficult, perhaps a third person, such as a counselor or minister, might help minimize the stress of such an encounter and hopefully direct the negative feelings to their appropriate source.

Guilt

Guilt is another emotion that parents often feel. Society expects parents to be able to protect their children, and a child's death may make the parents feel they have failed in this responsibility. Fathers may wish they had spent more time with the child, or mothers may feel guilty if they were employed outside the home. The child's every unfulfilled wish may be remembered with guilt. This type of guilt is usually irrational. It is important that parents be able to discuss these guilty feelings as they occur and to understand that the child's death was unrelated to the events that have caused their guilty feelings.

Physical Concerns

Because emotional health is so closely tied with physical health, the traumatic, emotional event of a child's death may affect parents physically. Bereaved parents often report physical symptoms such as loss of appetite, restlessness and/or sleeplessness, tightness in the throat, empty feelings in the abdomen, general fatigue, etc. Parents report that they take more medication than they did before the death, including tranquilizers and alcohol. Drugs may eliminate some uncomfortable feelings temporarily, but in the long run, they will only prolong the recovery period. Increased use of drugs also may adversely affect the marriage relationship.

Emotional Concerns

Parents may think about the dead child constantly. They may also think they hear the child's voice or see the child in a crowd. These thoughts may cause the parent to question his or her sanity. These feelings are not unusual in the early months of grieving, and it is not wise to deny their presence. Holidays and anniversaries, such as the child's birthday or date of death, are especially difficult times for parents, even for many years after the death. In fact, some parents believe that holidays are never the same again. Parents should be sensitive to each other's sadness at these times.

Social Isolation

Most parents believe that people who have never experienced the death of a child cannot understand their grief. They often feel resentment when well-meaning people offer "solutions" for their grief. Parents who feel socially isolated from others seem to experience more depression over time. Support groups, composed solely of bereaved parents, are available in many communities. Members can offer comfort and understanding to grieving parents. (Contact the local extension office for the names of any groups available in your area.)

Sexual Adjustments

Bereaved parents report that sexual problems often occur following a child's death. Often one or both parents may not want to have sexual relations for some time after the child has died. Both mothers and fathers may associate the sex act with the birth of the dead child, thereby arousing painful memories during this intimate experience. When a difference occurs between spouses regarding the resumption of sexual relationships, they should discuss their feelings at that time. If a couple is still in the child bearing stage, they may believe that having another child will help diminish the grief. However, this is seldom a wise idea. Parents may not be strong enough, emotionally, to cope with the demands of a small infant. Also, the "replacement" child may suffer from unrealistic expectations by the parents to fulfill their dreams for the deceased child. Parents are wise to postpone a pregnancy until they sense that they are recovering from their grief.

How Parents Can Help Each Other

Some people believe that marriages are more likely to suffer following a child's death. However, recent studies suggest that, while parents may have more negative feelings toward each other soon after the child's death, in time, the marriage will return to about the same level of satisfaction that parents experienced prior to the death. The key to maintaining a functional marriage during bereavement is good communication between parents.

It will be difficult for either spouse to support the other during the initial grief period because each spouse is so deeply involved in his or her own sadness and loss. One exception to parental grieving being equal, but separate, seems to be related to miscarriages or stillbirths. In these causes for death, fathers seem to recover from intense grief faster than mothers do, and they often find it difficult to understand mothers' extended periods of grief.

As mentioned earlier, each parent will experience the death in a different way. Each parent may feel that grieving is a very lonely experience. Parents should allow open expression of feelings, and as time passes, perhaps each may serve as a support for the other.

How Parents Can Help Remaining Children

Parents may be so grief stricken they forget to attend to the needs of remaining siblings. They sometimes believe that children should be "protected" from discussing the dead child because they are too young or should not see how grief stricken the parents are. Indeed, children of almost any age will sense that something is wrong by the reactions of parents, and they will feel comforted when parents talk with them in an open, honest manner. They need to know that such a death is unlikely for them. Also, they sense how valued they are as children when they see parents openly grieve for the dead sibling.

Children should be encouraged to express their feelings, as they, too, may have feelings of guilt, anger, fear, and/or loneliness. Parents should be alert to grief reactions in children. School-age children may exhibit a decreased interest in school and grades. Adolescent children may be rebellious or have increased periods of moodiness, whereas preschoolers may regress to thumb sucking, bed wetting, whining, etc. Any behavior that does not seem normal for that particular child should be attended to by parents with open discussion and reassurance of parental love for that child. When parental grief is particularly acute and the parent(s) feel they cannot give support to another person, they might consider having another relative or friend spend time with the child or children to help answer their questions.

How Others Can Help Parents Grieve

When a child dies, family members and friends are often at a loss in knowing how to comfort the grieving parents. Unfortunately, most bereaved parents do not find well-meaning

family members or friends very helpful. The following suggestions for helping parents during the grief process come from parents who have experienced the death of a child.

1. Don't offer cliches such as "Time heals all wounds" or "It is God's will."
2. Don't tell parents that you know how they feel, unless you, too, are a bereaved parent.
3. Don't deny parents the right to grieve by telling them how well they are bearing up or that they must be strong for others.
4. Do LISTEN. A true friend of the grieving parent will listen as long as the person wants to talk or cry about the child. This may take months or years, but a friend doesn't keep track of time.
5. Continue to visit and call the bereaved parents until they indicate this is no longer necessary. Don't assume that the grieving period is over. Bereaved parents often feel very alone within six months following the death because friends and relatives stop talking about the deceased child as if enough time had elapsed to complete the period of mourning.
6. Remember that bereaved parents probably suffer the most acute grief possible. Their recovery may seem slow and relapses will occur. Be patient and caring as they work toward recovery.

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