

Loss of a Child

The death and loss of a child are frequently called the ultimate tragedy. Nothing can be more devastating. Along with the usual symptoms and stages of grief, many issues make parental bereavement particularly difficult to resolve. And this grief over the loss of a child can be exacerbated and complicated by feelings of injustice — the understandable feeling that this loss should never have happened.

During the early days of grieving, most parents experience excruciating pain, alternating with numbness — a dichotomy that may persist for months or longer. Many parents who have lost their son or daughter report feeling they can only “exist,” and every motion or need beyond that seems nearly impossible. It has been said that coping with the death and loss of a child requires some of the most challenging work one will ever have to do.

The death of a child goes against the natural order we expect life to follow. The loss carries with it the loss of the future, the hopes, dreams, and potential that can never be fulfilled. The longing for the child and the feeling of emptiness can last a lifetime.

Some parents describe feeling complete disbelief, mixed with flashes of reality too awful to think about. You may feel numb, empty, enraged, anxious or exhausted. You may feel guilty, feeling that you were responsible for their safety and that you should have been able to prevent what happened. Some parents also feel guilty because they have survived their child.

During the time of deep mourning, there is a significant need to go over and over the circumstances of the death. Whilst everyone experiences grief in their own way, there are common factors to the healing process that can be acknowledged as time passes.

Withdrawal – very soon tiredness and exhaustion kicks in, which manifests itself as fatigue, anguish, despair and in many cases, depression. During this time, parents may withdraw from friendships; they are overwhelmed by grief.

Acceptance – whilst in this period, parents can come to realise that nothing can alter what has happened. This phase is one of searching for a meaning, forgiving, and trying to move away from the awful circumstances of the death.

Surviving grief – When we loss someone we love, things cannot return to what they were for that would be to make them as though they had never been.

Yet it is the experience of grief, and not denying it or avoiding it, that finally heals us. There will always be memories, yet we know we have made progress when our child can be lovingly remembered without agonising pain. We discover strengths that help us fill the emptiness and rebuild our lives.