



# LOSS OF A CHILD

*"When your child dies, you lose your future."*

*-Dr. Elliot Luby*

**The death of a child is frequently called the ultimate tragedy.** Nothing can be more devastating. It is not surprising that there are many issues that make parental bereavement particularly difficult to resolve. Parents whose child has died undergo all the normal reactions to grief and are particularly susceptible to additional problems caused by the injustice of their loss.

During the early days of grieving, **parents experience excruciating pain and terrifying thoughts.** They just exist. They feel numb. They are under such extreme stress that they are passive and indecisive. This is because of the shock of the death. The beginning of survival comes later. Coping with the loss of a child requires some of the hardest work one will ever have to do.

The relationship that exists between parents and their children may well be the most intense that life can generate. Much of parenting centers around providing and doing for children. **A child's death robs an adult of the ability to carry out the parenting role.** A parent usually feels an overwhelming sense of failure at not fulfilling the basic duties of parenthood.

**Guilt appears to be one of the most common responses to the death of a child.** Feelings of guilt arise from a parent's sense of personal responsibility for the child's well being. There is also a feeling of powerlessness that is attributed to the parent's inability to have protected the child from harm. Anger and frustration are also feelings reported by parents. If the child's death was accidental, all of these emotions are intensified.

One of our **basic assumptions is that a parent will die before a child.** The orderliness of the universe seems to be undermined when this expectation is not met. When a parent outlives their child, they feel that a natural law has been violated.

**Parents grieve not only for their child, but also for the loss of their hopes, dreams and expectations for that child.** Time will not necessarily provide relief from this aspect of grief. Depending on the age at death, the time when a child would have started school, graduated, married, etc. often brings upsurges in grief. Parents are rarely prepared for these re-occurrences.

**The search for meaning of the child's death is especially important** to parents. The understanding of how a death fits into the scheme of life is difficult. Why children must suffer and die is a question that few can answer satisfactorily. Faith is a source of comfort for many. Yet, some parents who have a religious belief report feeling betrayed by God. Religious confusion is normal.

It must be remembered that bereaved parents come in all ages. It does not make a difference whether one's child is three or thirty-three if he or she dies. The emotion is the same. **All bereaved parents lose a part of themselves.**

## THE EFFECT OF A CHILD'S DEATH IN A FAMILY

Studies have shown that grief will not necessarily strengthen a marriage. Each partner becomes deeply involved in his or her own grief. Spouses are particularly vulnerable to the feelings of blame and anger that those who are grieving often displace onto those nearest them. This is one of the most difficult aspects of parental bereavement. It is extremely important that each understand the importance of communication (**sharing of feelings**).

No two people grieve alike, thus, there is a wide latitude of differences in the expression of their grief. Any of these differences may cause the marriage partners to erroneously conclude that their mate has rejected them. A bereaved couple may find it impossible to give comfort to each other when feeling an equal grief. Each partner may expect too much and receive too little. This unfortunate combination can create a chasm in a relationship, but it can be avoided if each accepts the other as they are, with no expectations-just the knowledge that **both of you are deeply hurt.**

One of the most difficult roles for a mother or father when a child dies is to continue being a parent to the surviving children. Parents must continue to function in the very role they are grieving. This is enormously difficult! Yet it is important not to allow a living child to feel alone. **Parents must use all their reserve emotions of caring and comforting to comfort their other children**, thus switching roles constantly from being comforted to being the comforter. Parents must be gentle with themselves and the others around them in the weeks and months ahead.

## HELPFUL SUGGESTIONS

The resolution of parental grief is a difficult task, but not an impossible one (although some days it may feel impossible). **Parents need to be realistic and optimistic.** You will survive, although you will change. You will never forget the child or the death. Feelings of emptiness will remain, but the pain will diminish as you learn to live with the tragedy. As you go through each holiday, each season, each happy and sad occasion, you will gain strength in coping.

Confront and admit to feelings of guilt (if you have guilt). Examine the reality of the death situation and your actual intent at the time. You may see your actions in a more positive light. **Forgive yourself for being imperfect** (no one is perfect).

One of the major hurdles parents experience in their return to the world of the living is their inability to accept pleasure. Enjoyment is one of the most important survival tools. **It is OKAY to laugh in the midst of tears.** You may feel that laughter betrays your child's memory, but you need to acquire a secure knowledge that you are not abandoning your grieving by enjoying yourself. **The only way to survive bereavement is to step away from it occasionally.**

**Physical activity** is a good method to use as a release from grief. Take a walk, jog or chop wood. The more vigorous the activity, the better.

Take life one-step at a time. **Break down the future into small steps** of an hour or a day and deal only with one portion at a time.

**Focus on the positive** events and experiences in the relationship you had with your child. You might wish to make a journal of all the details you want to remember about each happening in your child's life. Review your family photographs and include some in your book.

Many parents have found that an investment of energy in a meaningful altruistic effort to help others reduced their depression. **By turning the tragedy of the child's death into an activity that helps others**, parents may find some meaning in their situation.

The **Compassionate Friends** is a self-help group of bereaved parents. The Compassionate Friends has 575 chapters in the United States. To contact The Compassionate Friends find them on the web at [compassionatefriends.org](http://compassionatefriends.org) or call them toll free at (877) 969-0010 or fax them at (630) 990-0246. If you cannot attend a support group, talk to others who have experienced the loss of a child.

You will **benefit from reading** all you can about grief and how it will affect you and members of your family. The information you read will give you a sense of control over what is happening.

Many people want to be supportive of you but are at a loss for what to do. Bereaved parents may have to be the one to take the first step in reaching out to others. **Let others know your needs.**

**The death of a child is probably the most devastating experience a parent can ever face.** Although it seems impossible that anything positive could emerge from this experience, some parents have shared that they have grown from the death of their child. Some parents have reported that they have a stronger faith because of the experience. Some feel that they are more compassionate and caring toward others and that they live life more fully because they have an increased awareness of life's fragility.

**Surviving the loss of a child takes a dedication to life.** As a parent, you gave birth to life as a promise to the future. Now you must make a new commitment to living.