

Helping yourself when your child has died ...



The death of your child is likely to be the most painful and difficult experience you will ever have. A child's death violates all that we expect from the natural course of events. "Children should outlive their parents," we say. In most cases, they do. But what do we do when we find ourselves saying a final goodbye to a child? What then? What can we do to help ourselves in such awful circumstances?

Experience Your Grief

At least at first, you may find yourself unable to accept that your child really has died. That is certainly understandable and normal. Give yourself time to absorb this harsh fact and to begin to acknowledge its many implications. Allow yourself to experience your grief in all of its dimensions — physical, psychological, social and spiritual. Do so gradually and in small doses, if you can. Thinking about your child or talking about your child with others may sometimes be painful. At other times it may be comforting. Don't be afraid to cry when you need. Tears are healing. The depth of the grief that you are currently experiencing is likely to relate closely to the depth of the relationship you shared with your child. Grief is the price we pay for having loved, for in doing so, we have allowed ourselves to be vulnerable to loss.

Coping with Your Grief

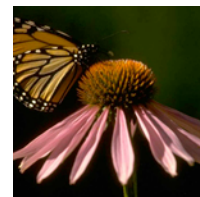
Try to manage, not master, your loss and grief. Focus on the present. You needn't try to work out your entire future right away. Take one day at a time — but don't try to cope even with an hour at a time if that is too much for you right now. Time does not heal all by itself, but the way we use the time that is available to us can help us to heal and grow.

Be mindful of your needs for food and water, rest and exercise. Taking good care of yourself is essential to provide the resources you need to function on a daily basis. You will need to find your own way after the death of your child. Coping with such an awful loss is a very individualized experience. Think of what helped you when you encountered other, smaller losses earlier in life.

Support from Family and Friends

Maintain relationships with immediate family members and friends. You really need their support right now, even if you don't think there is much they can do for you. Do not hesitate to ask friends for assistance when you need help. True friends will be glad to learn how to help you in practical matters and other ways. If someone says or does something that is not helpful or perhaps is even hurtful, you may wish to explain your feelings and discuss what does help. Do not suffer in silence. Look out for yourself.

Most people mean well, but sometimes they don't know what to do or what to say. In fact, we all have much to learn about what responses are appropriate when a child dies. You will likely find yourself teaching these lessons whether you want to or not. Be gentle, but firm; teach people to be more understanding and helpful to you. When you give them permission, true friends will welcome opportunities to share with you their memories of your child — and you, too, will benefit, because their memories will enrich the legacy of your child in your own mind and heart.



Draw Strength from Other Bereaved Parents

Bereaved parents often report that other parents who lost children were their most effective helpers. "They knew the pain. They knew what to say and what not to say." It may help you to seek out a local support group for bereaved parents by asking for referrals from a funeral home, hospice program, or a religious institution in your area.

Focus on Your Child's Legacy

Many parents have found it helpful to concentrate not only on what they have lost, but also on what their child has meant, and continues to mean to them. They reflect on how their child enriched their lives. You can do this by thinking about the special place and meaning your child holds for you. Your life is richer because your child lived.

Your relationship with your child will now be different — that is the hard fact resulting from death. However, your child will always have a place in your heart — that will never change. Even though your child is no longer alive, you can still love that child for as long as you live. Loving in separation is no less real than loving in presence.

Your child helped to make you who you now are in your life's journey. The legacy of your child can still help you grow; it can continue to have profound effects in your own life and in the lives of those around you.

Commemorating Your Child's Life

You can commemorate the life of your child in many ways. Some parents write brief poems or short stories, while others compose a journal of memories, create a garden, make a charitable donation, or establish a scholarship in their child's memory.

Other parents commemorate the life of their child by buying or making a special present on their child's birthday, holidays, or other gift-giving occasions. They then donate the present in the memory of their child to a poor youngster or to a charity. In this and other ways, you can maintain an important connection with your child and keep his or her memory and legacy alive in your own life.

You can often help yourself best by accepting support and love from those who love you and who knew and loved your child, as well as by helping others who turn to you for support and love. Everyone who loved your child will be affected by his or her death. All of them still need to feel loved, secure, and like they are an important part of your family. Shared hugs and tears are great ways to say, "we still are a family, the child who died remains a part of our family, and in spite of everything we all continue to matter."

About the Author

Charles A. Corr, Ph.D., is Professor emeritus, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, and former Chairperson (1989-1993) of the International Work Group on Death, Dying, and Bereavement. Dr. Corr's professional publications include 22 books and more than 80 articles and chapters on a wide variety of death-related topics.

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