

Coping Alone

If we are a single parent, these burdens are, the heavier. Not only do we have to be mother and father to our surviving children, but we have no-one to be with us in our worst times. As well as feeling desperately alone, we may find that his loss reminds us of other earlier losses, perhaps even the loss of our child's father, and we may feel doubly bereaved.

In this situation, we urgently need the support of other adults, whether family, friends or professional support services, if we are able to help ourselves and our surviving children. If we are now childless the isolation is almost unbearable, and we may question our continuing identity as a mother.

Children born after the death of their brother or sister

Some of us may give birth to further children after our child has died. We may be surprised by how interwoven are our feelings, how the past death is somehow also a part of the new birth. Some mothers experience vivid flashbacks during pregnancy or labour.

Although we are looking forward to the birth of our new baby, we may find ourselves suffering extremes of anxiety and fear, our confidence is gone and we are full-of doubt and terror. This can make the early weeks and months very fraught and may make bonding with the new baby very difficult.

Sometimes friends and well-wishers can be extraordinarily insensitive in thinking, and even saying, that the new baby will somehow wipe out the earlier loss, that everything will be 'all right' when we have a replacement. It is hard to have to explain that the new baby can never replace the child who has died, can never repair the rent that was torn in the fabric of our bright canopy.

We welcome the new child as a blessing and a joy - but we welcome them for themselves, not as a substitute.

Difficulties in grieving together

We may be shocked to find that we experience difficulties in our marriage or partnership. Even when we have been close, the pain of grief can drive a wedge between us. We think we should be able to share our loss, to support each other. But often it is not like that. We may grieve in different ways, one needing words while the other needs silence, or perhaps action. We may find our partner's tears unbearably painful. We may hurt too much to be able to hold our partner's pain as well as our own.

As mothers, we are used to being the person who 'makes things better', or the one who sorts things out. The death of our child is beyond sorting out. Fathers may feel they failed in their perceived roles as provider or protector. We may each try to sort out the other's problems, rather than cling together and let ourselves grieve.

If our relationship was difficult before, it may get worse, rather than better, at least in the short term. And it may improve in the long term through our shared suffering, and growing understanding of each other's grief.

The way forward

We need to survive. As mothers, we need to be there for our children, our partner, our family. If we are in the horrific position of being the only survivor, then perhaps we need to survive in order to bear witness to the fact that our child did live, that he or she was special, precious, loved. Mothers do survive and there are some things which can help.

Perhaps the most important one is to recognize that we need support: this is not something we are expected to bear alone and for some the burden is too great. We all need to let other people help us. Sometimes we are so locked into our motherhood role that we find this very difficult.

The Compassionate Friends offers support through monthly support group meetings, a message bank service allowing you to talk with a bereaved parent, monthly workshops, a quarterly newsletter, its Compassionate Friends SA Facebook Page, Balloon Release, Walk to Remember®, and The Compassionate Friends Worldwide Candle Lighting.

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A Mother's Grief



The Compassionate Friends
SOUTH AUSTRALIA

*Bereaved families
caring for each other*

When we first become mothers we experience powerful feelings of protection; we realize we will do anything to keep our children safe from harm.

They become our highest priority, the centre of our new identity. Our lives change, we give up sleep, energy, privacy, free time. Being a mother expands our sense of who we are, and we develop into a new person.

We find strengths and skills we never knew we had; patience, empathy, attunement with another human being who is totally vulnerable. We accept new and wide responsibilities, we look and plan much further ahead. We put our child's needs ahead of our own, we adapt to our child's time-frame; we become nurse, teacher, handyman, umpire and so many other things too.

We may also find out uncomfortable things we did not know before. But we change - and we change for always. We have a powerful desire to erect a 'bright canopy' over our child, to make their life as perfect as we can, to keep them safe against all harm.

It is this 'bright canopy' which is torn apart when our child dies. We lose a part of ourselves, not only because they are our children, but because of the way they have become entwined with our own identity. Our inner world is torn, as well as our outer world.

We may experience an overwhelming sense of failure; we thought that we could keep them safe, protect them, and we have been shown in the harshest way possible that we were wrong. Whatever age our child is when they die, we still feel the wrongness of their death. The natural order of the universe is that parents die before their children; anything else is against nature, an accident, a catastrophe.

Our physical loss

When we have given birth to our child, the physical sense of losing a part of ourselves, if that child dies, is searing. We carried our child in our womb for nine months, our body was their source of nourishment. There are real physical parallels between the contractions of labour and the pains of grief. And their birthday was literally that: the day we gave them birth.

Many of us feel the loss of our child as an intensely physical pain; our wombs, hearts and guts are wrenched, and we suffer actual pain. Some of us find the anniversary of their birth day a very lonely and difficult time because our memories of that day are unique to us. We may find ourselves needing to relive those hours each day. And that is something our families may not be able to share, or even comprehend.

Caring and losing

As mothers our care for our children has been intensely physical, we have fed them, changed them, cuddled them and held them in our arms. Now they are gone, and it is not surprising that our arms feel empty and we ourselves feel lost, that we have lost part of ourselves, or that part of ourselves has gone with them. Even when our children are older, the memories of physical care are part of the bond between us.

The circumstances in which they died will affect how we feel. We may have fought a long, all consuming battle with illness which has finally been lost. We may suffer from the trauma that a sudden death brings - our child may have gone out to play or to work and never returned. We may be struggling to understand the despair that led our child to suicide. We may now have become a 'childless parent' or even a single childless parent. Each death brings its own particular burdens.

When our son or daughter dies, we want to go on caring for them as long as possible. In deaths where a post-mortem (autopsy) is involved we are prevented from doing this for a while, sometimes even forbidden to touch them, and that hurts. Mothers who are able to hold their dead baby, wash and dress him, place him in the coffin themselves, are able to bring this physical care to some sort of completion. It is hard to be deprived of these opportunities. Some mothers have found the giving up of their child's body an agony, and that this continued to hurt them for a long time.

Our surviving children

If we have surviving children, they also need our care, now more than ever for they are confused and hurting. Their lives too have been changed forever.

Many children look back at the time immediately after the death of their brother or sister and say they felt as if they had lost their mother and father too - their whole family had disintegrated. We may know this is happening, yet be unable to prevent it. We are at this time so disabled by our grief that we find it difficult to be a mother to our other children.

Sometimes we struggle to protect our children from the full extent of our grief, because it seems a burden too big for them to shoulder. But this can leave them feeling even more alone; if we do not share our tears with them, they feel shut out. It is better to weep together than be separated by closed doors.

Our children's grief compounds our sense of guilt; our failure as a protector has led not just to our child's death; if we have other children, it has wounded them too. We cannot undo that

hurt, we cannot make them better. In reality, we can probably help them less with this than with any other pain they have experienced in their lives so far, because we ourselves are struggling with something too great to be endured.

As mothers we may have feelings of failure and guilt over the death of our child, and these may bring us an overwhelming urge to protect our surviving children, even finding it difficult to allow them to lead a normal life, to let them out of our sight.

This is especially true if the death of our child was due to murder, or some terrible accident; we fear the same thing may happen again. We know this is not logical, but our protective mothering instinct is in overdrive and cannot easily be controlled.

Others in the family

We may also be trying to carry other members of our family at this time. Our own mother has lost her grandchild and is grieving; we may be able to cling together in the wreckage and keep each other afloat, but often we try to be strong for each other by hiding our grief. And, like our own children, we may feel we have lost our own mother, that she is unavailable to us because of her grief. We want to shout "Who is mothering me?"

We are fortunate indeed if there are people to answer that cry for help, whoever they may be. We may also feel that elderly or frail parents need protecting from seeing the depths of our own grief; but in fact most of us are helped more by sharing than by pretending.

