

Listening as part of the healing process

It is of the utmost importance in the healing process that the bereaved parents be permitted to tell their own unique story, to be listened to and to have their feelings and thoughts accepted with understanding at this time.

Because of the traumatic shock of the death of a child, society and the caring professions often do not know how to comfort grieving parents and help them to cope with their anguish.

Only other bereaved parents through their understanding seem able to help them to come to terms with their grief.

Great relief comes as the parents find the listener is wanting to hear about their child, the details of his/her personality and his/her place in the life of the family, the account of his/her accident, illness and death and the outpourings of their own repressed feelings.

Immediately after the death the parents are surrounded by friends and relatives, but soon these drift away leaving the bereaved parents feeling abandoned and depressed and unable to cope with the readjustment to their lives. Today, society smothers the topic of death in embarrassment. The reality of grief is denied and there are few outlets for the relief of pent up anxieties, guilt feelings, anger, loneliness, and inability to see any hope for future happiness. Medicines and tablets may bring temporary relief, but the need is to be allowed to talk freely to an understanding and compassionate friend. The listener often speaks of their own experience giving the bereaved the sense that they are not alone and unique in their suffering, and that emotional strains are normal and can be overcome in time.

Where can I get help?

It helps to become involved with a group of parents having similar experiences; sharing eases loneliness and promotes the expression of your grief in an atmosphere of acceptance and understanding. This is why parents worldwide find "The Compassionate Friends" so helpful. Bereaved parents and their families can find healing and hope for the future as they reorganize their lives in a positive way - but it doesn't happen overnight.

The Compassionate Friends subscriptions enable the following:

- » Produce our newsletter (4 per year)
- » Subsidise social and monthly support group functions throughout the year.
- » Maintain libraries.
- » Anniversary cards to all families.
- » Subsidise a memorial notice for all our children in newspapers for International Children's Memorial Day.
- » Phone service.
- » Rental of meeting rooms for monthly support group and committee meetings.
- » Subsidise annual memorial events – Candle Lighting, Balloon Release and Walk to Remember.

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Contact us...



The Compassionate Friends (SA) Inc.

PO Box 26
Kent Town SA 5071

Tel: 0456 820 133

tcfainc@outlook.com

www.compassionatefriendssa.org.au

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Understanding Grief When A Child Dies



The Compassionate Friends
SOUTH AUSTRALIA

*Bereaved families
caring for each other*

Grief, with its many ups and downs, lasts far longer than society in general recognizes.

Be patient with yourself. The period of time before one adjusts back to "normal" life after the loss of a child can be very long. Each person's grief is individual. You and your spouse will experience it and cope with it differently - so be prepared for this. Understanding that there will be big variations in your forms of grieving and behaviour can make you much more understanding of each other.

Emotional aspects of grieving

Crying is an acceptable and healthy expression of grief and releases built up tension for mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters. Cry freely as you feel the need. Remember the old saying, "Tears wash the wounds of the soul."

Guilt, real or imagined, is a normal part of grief. It surfaces in thoughts and feelings of "if only". In order to resolve this guilt, learn to express and share these feelings and learn to forgive yourself. It may help to talk these feelings through with an understanding counsellor.

Anger is another common reaction to loss. Anger, like guilt, needs expression and sharing in a healthy and acceptable manner. However, it often happens that we over-react and "blow our tops". If family and friends understand this might happen sometimes they are more tolerant.

Parents may feel they have nothing to live for and may think about a release from this intense pain. Be assured that many parents feel this way but a sense of purpose and meaning does return. The intense pain does lessen. It becomes duller and eventually leaves a sadness tinged with many beautiful memories. Hope for this to happen one day.

Physical aspects of grieving

Physical reactions to the death of a child may include loss of appetite or overeating, sleeplessness, and sexual difficulties. Parents may find that they have very little energy... are always tired and cannot concentrate. A balanced diet, rest and moderate exercise are especially important for the whole family at this time.

Avoid the use of drugs and alcohol. Medication should be taken sparingly and only under the management of your physician. Many substances are addictive and can lead to chemical dependence. In addition, they may stop or delay the necessary grieving process.

Friends and relatives may be uncomfortable around you. They want to ease your pain but do not know how. Take the initiative and help them to learn how to be supportive to you. Talk about your child so that they know this is appropriate. Don't be too proud and self-reliant - give people the opportunity to get close to you and help you.

Decision-making

Whenever possible, put off major decisions (changing residence, changing jobs etc.) for at least a year.

Avoid making hasty decisions about your child's belongings. Do not allow others to take over or to rush you. You can do it little by little whenever you feel ready. It is often comforting to leave things as they are for a time.

How can I help surviving siblings?

Children are often the forgotten grievers within a family. They are experiencing many of the same emotions you are, so share thoughts and tears with them. Though this is a painful time, be sure they feel loved and included. Talk to them and cry with them around the kitchen table. Hold them physically and don't let them think they have to be strong for your sake.

Special occasions

Holidays and anniversaries of your child's death and birth can be stressful times. Consider the feelings of the entire family in planning how to spend the day. Allow time and space for your own emotional needs. Sometimes the anticipation of the day is far worse than the day when it actually comes.

How to face the future

A child's death often causes a parent to challenge and examine his faith or philosophy of life. Don't be disturbed if you are questioning old beliefs. Talk about it. For many, faith offers help to accept the unacceptable. This is the time for deep thinking, reading, and working out priorities. Nothing else will ever activate this side of your nature more profoundly.

When a child dies, parents begin a long journey in the process of bereavement.

On this journey, the bereaved parents experience many different and shattering kinds of feelings... Disbelief, sadness, deep anguish, loneliness, fear, jealousy, anger and regret. These feelings are all part of the emotional reactions of grief. Sometimes those feelings of grief may be so intense that parents do not understand what is happening. Some parents tend to keep feelings inside while others are able to express their grief easily and openly.

In experiencing the loss of a beloved child (the ultimate tragedy) because of the enormous emotional stress the loss places upon the parents, all sections of their lives will probably be affected and changed. The interaction between the bereaved person and his/her spouse, family, work, other children, religious faith, sex life... and even the everyday activities such as eating and sleeping will be affected.

These difficulties can be better coped with if the bereaved parent has someone to whom to turn who understands and has even experienced these difficulties personally.

