



## Grief At the Loss of a Child

A child's death creates an overwhelming sense of injustice for lost potential, unfulfilled dreams and senseless suffering. Parents may feel responsible for the child's death, no matter how irrational that may seem. Parents may also feel that they have lost a vital part of their own identity. Their reason for living may seem shattered.

### Mourning a Loved One

It is not easy to cope after a loved one dies. You will mourn and grieve. Mourning is the natural process you go through to accept a major loss. Mourning may include religious traditions honoring the dead or gathering with friends and family to share your loss. Mourning is personal and may last months or years. Grieving is the expression of your loss. Grief is likely to be expressed both physically and psychologically. For instance, crying is a physical expression, while depression is a psychological expression.

It is very important to allow yourself to express your feelings. Often, death is a subject that is avoided, ignored or denied. At first it may seem helpful to separate yourself from the pain or ignore your feelings, but you cannot avoid grieving forever. Someday those buried feelings will need to be resolved or they may cause physical or emotional illness.

Many people report physical symptoms that accompany grief. Stomach pain, loss of appetite, intestinal upsets, sleep disturbances and loss of energy are all common symptoms of acute grief. Of all life's stresses, mourning can seriously test your natural defense systems. Existing illnesses may worsen or new conditions may develop.

Profound emotional reactions may occur. These reactions include anxiety attacks, chronic fatigue, depression and thoughts of suicide. An obsession with the deceased is also a common reaction to death.

### Stages of Grief

1. **Disbelief**
  - Shock
  - Difficulty concentrating
  - Not fully accepting loss at this time
  - "Children should outlive parents/adults."
2. **Denial**
  - Telling yourself it isn't true or didn't happen
  - Dwelling on the past—positive memories with sadness
  - "This can't be."
3. **Anger/Rage**
  - Why him/her? Why now? So young...
  - Negative feelings toward...? (person perceived responsible)
  - It's neither right nor wrong, just a normal stage of grief.
  - "How could this happen?"
4. **Panic**
  - Feeling alone, confused, tired, exhausted

- No shortcut in the grief process
- “What am I going to do? I can’t handle this.”

#### **5. Guilt**

- Why didn’t I spend more time with...? Why wasn’t I nicer? Why...?
- “What could/should I have done differently?”

#### **6. Sadness or Depression**

- Natural reaction to loss
- Part of process of saying goodbye to a person you care about
- No right length of time, but must move on at some point
- If feeling for extended period of time, could be problematic
- “This situation is so sad. I need time to grieve.”

#### **7. Acceptance**

- Feelings of confusion, panic, guilt, anger begin to subside
- Accepting loss and moving on
- Memories become positive experiences again
- “I will miss them.”

### **Suggestions for Dealing with Grief and Loss**

- Use healthy coping strategies, e.g., exercise, time with friends, eating right, enough sleep
- Participate in rituals and process as way of gaining closure
- Recognize different styles of grief in others
- Express your feelings to someone you trust
- Ask for help if you need it
- Be kind to yourself

### **Suggestions for Family Members and Friends**

- Listen and affirm
- Offer to help in any way possible
- Don’t offer false comfort
- Offer practical help, i.e., babysitting, cooking and running errands, etc.
- Support family in this difficult time through allowing them to express feelings
- Participate in rituals with family, if appropriate
- Be patient; acceptance, understanding of a major loss can take a long time

Remember, with support, patience and effort, you will survive grief. Some day the pain will lessen, leaving you with cherished memories of your loved one..

Source: Michael Conner, Psy. D. (2008). Understanding and Dealing with Grief and the Loss of Life.  
<http://www.crisiscounseling.com/traumaloss/GriefLoss.htm>

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