



When addiction wins

Losing a child to an overdose

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The unthinkable has happened

The instinct of a parent is to protect our children. So the news that our wonderful child has died is a tragedy, a blow that is hard to accept. Our world has been shattered. Nothing could be worse. But the news that drugs were the cause somehow makes the pain even worse. We failed to save our child.

There is a natural order to life: we are born, we get older, eventually we die. But no one expects to plan a funeral for a child. That's not the way it is supposed to be!

Loneliness

The shock of a tragic death has a way of making each of us feel like we must endure it alone. Even when other family members have experienced the same tragedy, we each can feel isolated, feeling that we must shed our tears in private. Understand that grief is an emotion that can come to us in waves, and not everyone, even members of the same family, is in the same place in their grief. At times we cry; at times we console others even as we grieve. Learn to accept a silent hug, offered because there are no words right now. Just tears.

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Denial and acceptance

Perhaps this loss followed months or years of struggle, when we tried to help our child break free of the addiction that had ensnared him or her. Maybe there was no warning at all, because we know—we know!—that drugs were not a part of our child's life. There must be some kind of mistake!

This life that had so much potential and promise, this life that we had shared and cared for since birth, this life that now will always be unfinished—we can't bear to accept that this beloved child will no longer be physically with us. So a part of our mind tries to protect us by denying that this tragedy has happened. It takes time for the news to sink in. It takes time to realize that there will be no more phone calls, and that familiar step will never again walk through the door.

Slowly, we come to accept that even though we have lost someone we deeply love, we still have happy memories. We are warmed by the understanding that our cherished child loved us. We come to accept that we can move forward, even with this loss.

Healing and Tears

As we heal, the tears will flow. When we tell someone about our beloved child, or hear a song they enjoyed, or smell their favorite dish being prepared,

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we are apt to be flooded with tears. It's OK. Tears are normal. They will go on for a long time, and they will sometimes come at unexpected times—at a family celebration that our child is no longer alive to share in, for example. But tears are part of healing.

Guilt and Shame, Anger and Blame

Losing a child because of drugs is often seen as something to be ashamed of. Too often the struggles a family has gone through because of drugs have been kept hidden, and so the true cause of a child's death is kept secret: "It was an accident."

Yes, our child died of an overdose, and we were powerless to help. Then guilt kicks in, and we start to blame ourselves. If only we hadn't missed the signs that our child was in trouble. If only we had tried an intervention earlier, or tried more aggressive treatment, or...

Stop. Yes, our child died from a drug overdose. Yes, she or he was absolutely responsible for his or her actions. But addiction does not lead to making sound decisions. An addicted person is in survival mode, and is not a rational person.

We know and remember the real person our child was before drugs took over. We helped our child fight this battle in the months before the fight was lost once and for all. When we look back we

will be tempted to think of things we could have or should have done differently. It's important to remember this: we were up against a monster, and we did our very best to help our child to win.

There is within us an urge to blame others for our loss. Guilt is powerful, and blaming others is a response that comes naturally. Is it my fault? No, and it's not your fault, either. We did everything we could. Accept that.

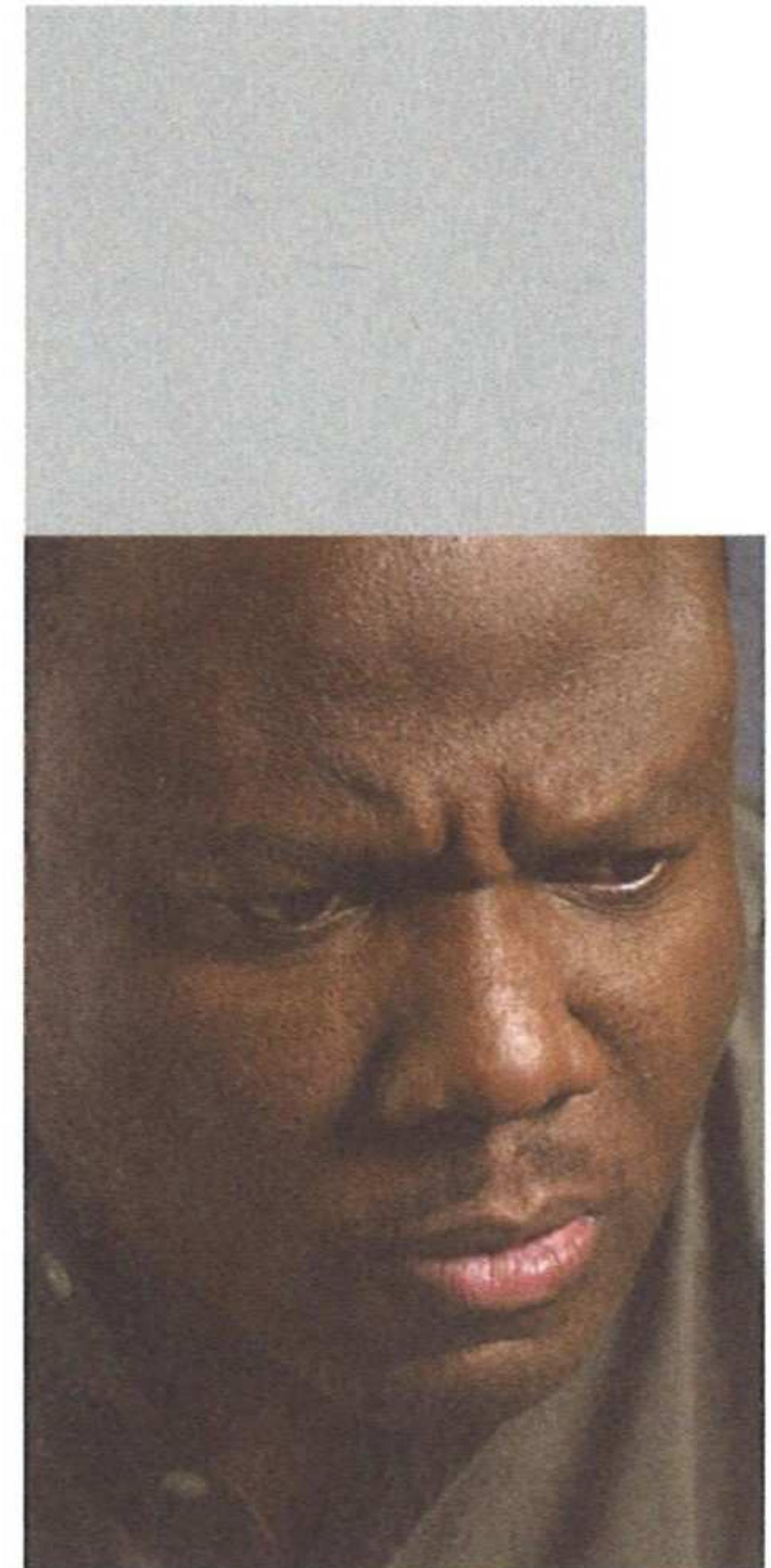
Guilt comes to us in another way, too. Our child did hurtful things because of drugs. The trust we had in our child's judgment was the first casualty of addiction. When it seemed like our child could not possibly sink lower, drugs took our child to even deeper depths.

The actions of an addict often make those who are close to him or her angry. Now that the struggle is over, memories of that anger may lead to guilt. The struggle may have been so painful for family members that there is a sense of relief that it is over—and that leads to more guilt.

Our child's struggle is ended, but our healing is just beginning. Remember that, although we may not have been perfect parents, *we did our best!* We were up against a powerful, unrelenting foe that had captured our beautiful, loving child and turned him or her into a stranger. This is not the time to turn against our



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spouse or the other members of our family. Anger and blame are corrosive, and hurtful to healing.

Forgiveness

We know our child didn't want to be an addict. Our child would have done anything to overcome his or her addiction. We have to learn to forgive our child.

How could we have been so blind to "the signs"? Where was the support, the intervention? We have to learn to forgive our spouse, our family, ourselves.

How can we forgive the one who introduced our child to drugs? The one who sold the fatal dose? Why are they still alive when our child is dead? This is the most difficult forgiveness of all. But harboring this anger and blame in our heart gets in the way of our healing. It may take years before we can forgive, and indeed, that day may never come. We will be healthier if we can learn to forgive this, too.

Healing

Healing this loss does not come quickly, and it does not proceed in an orderly fashion. But there are things we can do to promote recovery from this loss.

- *Talk about our child with others.*

Remember the "real" person he or she was before addiction.

- *Start a bereavement journal or scrapbook.* Our memories of our child are particularly powerful. Writing them down helps make them real, and allows us to revisit them later. We may find, or be sent, photos, articles, poems or other uplifting material that we can save now to help us through a low point later.

- *Laugh.* It may seem that our life will never again have laughter in it, but, clichés aside, laughter truly is the best medicine. Remembering stories of happy times with our child can lead to laughter, but if that seems too difficult now, just start with a smile at a stranger. They are apt to smile back.

- *Join a bereavement group.* Our child is not a statistic; he or she is a much-loved, much-missed, unique individual. But sadly, we are not alone in our loss. Countless others have walked this hard road before us. One such group with local chapters is grasphelp.org.

Other resources (available from libraries or online booksellers):

When a Child Dies From Drugs, Wittberger.
Healing a Parent's Grieving Heart, Wolfelt.
Beyond Tears, Ellen Mitchell.

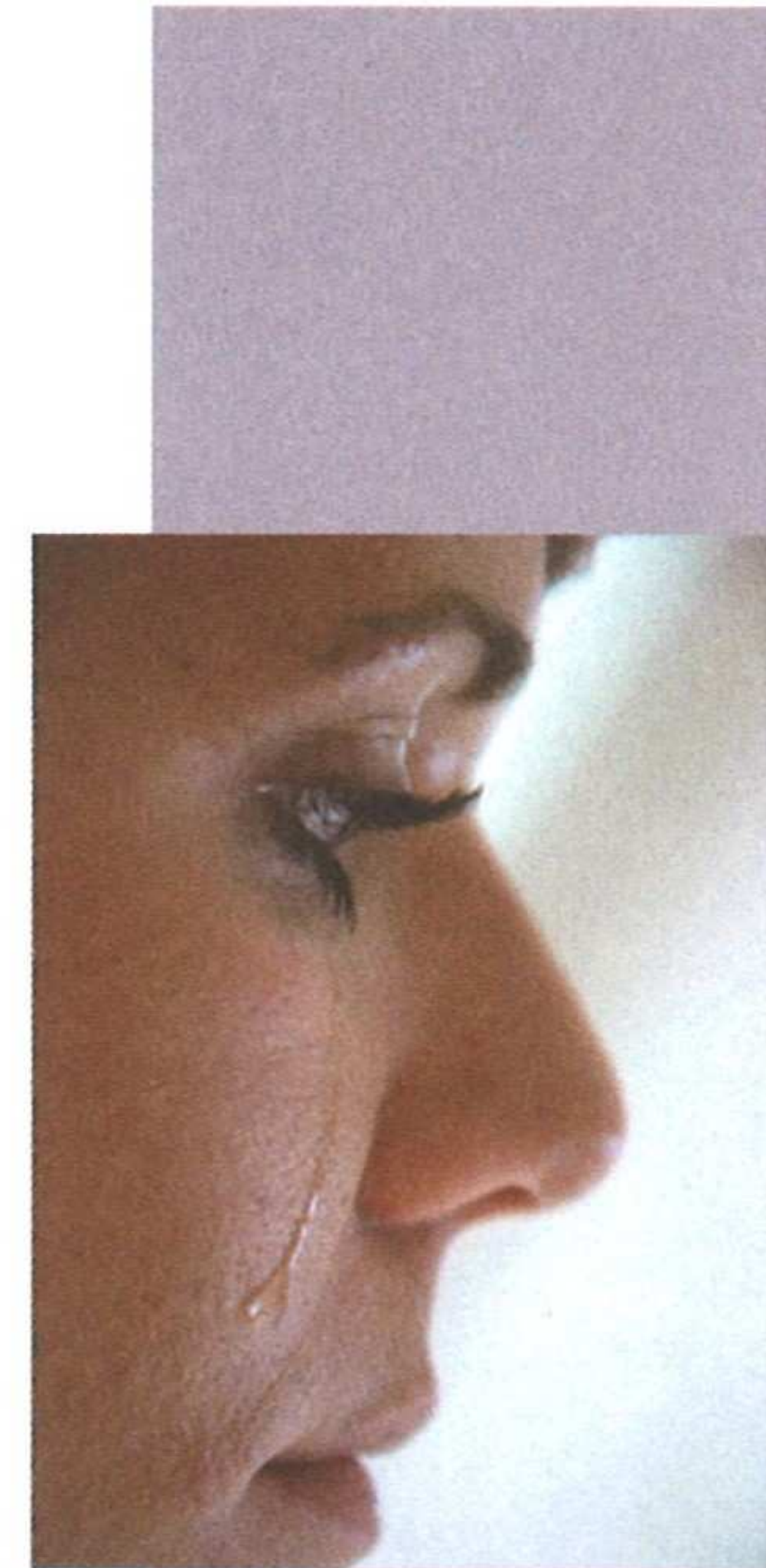
Surviving the Loss of a Child, Elizabeth Brown

About the author:

Mark Beito writes on memorialization and grief issues for the funeral service industry. He is the president of Mark Thomas Co.



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