

## Losing a Child

Grief is a powerful emotion. I've heard it described as standing with your back to the ocean and being overtaken by a wave that you didn't see coming. The emotions can be fierce, intense, unexpected, but also mind and soul numbing. Walking through your own or walking beside someone else is a journey that is impossible to predict and difficult to prepare for.

Grief that comes with losing a child is more complicated. It is against the "natural order" of things. It brings up feelings of despair because we expect ourselves to be the protector and provider. It is a shocking reality that you have survived and your child has not- which can feel impossible to comprehend. There is also a loss of future hopes and dreams, expectations of how the future would be and what your life would be like. This is a time when you are adapting to the new reality and beginning an overwhelming journey.

Also, when someone is terminally ill, the grieving process has begun long before the person has died. Many of the stages of grief will be experienced during the illness. We have been spared the trauma of a tragic and unexpected loss, but the process may be an extended one.

With that in mind, do not be afraid to come along side someone who is grieving. They need you. They need support, kind words, warm hugs, knowing touches, and acceptance. We are often worried that we "do not know what to say." Here's what I know about that:

1. Avoiding is the worst thing you can do. Approach the person who is grieving, talk with them, maybe offer a gentle hug, hand hold, or touch. It is important to take your relationship into consideration – do not try to become a best friend suddenly, but never avoid their presence, do not avoid eye contact. Use the loved one's name.
2. There is nothing so profound that you can say that will take away the pain. Don't try to find the perfect thing to say because it doesn't exist. There is nothing perfect to say because this is a terrible situation.
3. However, there are a few things that are best to avoid saying. Do NOT say:  
"Are you ok?" They are not ok and most people feel obliged to say "yes" when asked this question.  
"It was God's will." Do not say this because it is not helpful. Often it brings up more pain and confusion.  
"Time heals all wounds." "This too shall pass." "She's better off now." "Focus on what you have to be grateful for." These are platitudes that make the speaker feel better, but they usually hurt the receiver. They unintentionally imply that the griever needs to move on or even be happy about the outcome.

4. Here are a some things that are helpful:

“I’m so sorry.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

“I love you. I am here for you.”

Offer concrete help. “I’d like to bring you dinner next week.” “I’m headed to the grocery store/drug store, please give me a list.” “Can I pick up your kids from school on Friday?”

“Would you like to talk?”

“Would you like to go on a walk?”

“I/We really miss him/her.” (Even better to say the name specifically)

“How are you doing today?”

Use the name of the person who died. Remember their birthday. Talk about the anniversary of the loss. Do not think that you are reminding them that their child has died. They never forget. You are reminding them that their child lived and you have not forgotten.

5. You may be having your own fears of death and loss triggered by someone else’s tragedy. You may feel overwhelmed, devastated, confused, angry, deeply sad. Our own feelings and unresolved issues can arise when surrounded by something as upsetting as the death of a child. You may also be feeling grateful and relieved that this is not happening to you. It is ok to have these feelings. They need to be explored, expressed, and understood. They also need to be separated from the family that is currently experiencing a loss. These are your feelings and should be processed separately.
6. When talking with kids, it’s always best to be straight forward and honest. Share your beliefs with them. Share your feelings with them. It’s good for them to know that you’re sad, too. Talk openly about the person who has died. Always tell them that they can talk with you and that you can handle their questions and their feelings. Also remember that kids will process grief differently than adults process grief. It may seem quicker and be less tearful. Your job is to ask questions, create opportunities to talk about the loved one, be available, and trust their process.
7. And last, I want to briefly mention the stages of grief. I will list them in the order they were originally written about, however, *we have discovered that grieving is not a linear experience. People will go through all the stages, but usually they will hit each stage multiple times over and over again. Grief is messy, overwhelming and unpredictable.*

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Grieving starts with **Denial**. This is a form of shock that protects and surrounds a person so that their feelings can catch up to their reality. This helps us survive in a crisis mode for a season. Next is **Anger**. This may be appropriately placed onto the disease or a broken world. It may also be placed anywhere at any time. It may be triggered by something obvious and acceptable. It may be triggered by nothing at all. Next is **Bargaining**. We want to fix the problem. We may have a burst of energy around finding a solution, a compromise, fighting the disease, etc. This is followed by **Depression**. This is a deep sadness. Feeling like there's no reason to go on or believing that you will never be able to live, love, or laugh again. **Acceptance** is the final stage. In this stage you begin to smile. You start having moments where you feel alive again. There are days when remembering is a little easier and a "new normal" might seem possible.