

Coping with the Loss of a Child

The grieving process of dealing with the demise of a child.

By Geraldine Tan-Ho, Counsellor
Star PALS, HCA Hospice Care

Lossing a child is the most devastating experience any parent will ever have to endure. As with any loss, there are universal emotions that a bereaved person will experience. These include sadness, anger, guilt, utter disbelief and a great sense of longing for the deceased.

Grieving the loss of a child is a lifelong journey. Many parents derive meaning from their child's birth and death — finding inspiration from their child's strength and personality. Most parents reveal that they feel a deep sense of gratitude from having spent time together with their child no matter how short the timespan. These reflections help them greatly in coping with the loss of their beloved child.

Just as how each parent's love for their child is unique, so are their journeys of grief and acceptance. No matter how varied the journey, here are five helpful guidelines.

Grief has no time limit

Setting a timeframe for yourself to curtail your grief puts additional stress both on your loved ones and on yourself. Coming to terms with the death of a child is a lifelong journey. Some parents find that painful emotions come in smaller and less frequent waves with the passing of time while others maintain that these emotions stay the same throughout their lives. The grieving process is unique to each individual. Hence, there is no such thing as a standard timeline for grief.

Give yourself permission to feel

There is no right or wrong way to react after the death of a child. Some parents feel a great sense of relief after a long and tumultuous caregiving journey, while others feel numb and void of emotions. Some parents feel disappointed with their child for "giving up" despite their continued efforts for cure and treatment. Others feel angry with God for allowing their child to die. Never blame yourself for feeling what you might perceive as "inappropriate" emotions. Should these emotions be overwhelming and intrusive to your day-to-day life, talk to someone you know who might be able to empathise with your situation and hear you out.



Give others permission to grieve in their own way

Consider these scenarios: your spouse seems unaffected by the death of your child by going to work as per usual and you find him or her indulging in their usual hobbies as if nothing untoward has happened. Or perhaps your children refuse to talk about their deceased sibling and you start to wonder if they even bother about their sibling's passing. Not seeing others grieve the same way as you do might feel isolating, confusing and upsetting. Keep in mind that everyone grieves in their own way — no matter how different it might seem. Give them time and space to grieve, just like how you would appreciate your own time and space to cope with your loss.

Spend time with yourself and others

The sadness of grief can be physically, emotionally and mentally overwhelming. Some parents prefer to fill their day with activities in order to distract themselves from the pain. Try to take some time to be at peace with yourself and your emotions. This can be both a scary and painful journey but suppressing grief constantly can be damaging to both your physical and mental well-being. Because grief is unique to each individual, parents may find themselves wanting to be alone as they might feel that nobody might understand their pain. Giving yourself the opportunity to experience love and support from those who care about you, can be a great source of comfort. Some parents who might not be ready to socialise with family and friends might find comfort in simply connecting, via text messaging or social media platforms.

Be aware of how you are responding to your grief

While there is no right or wrong way to grieve, there are times when the pain can be so intense that you may find yourself responding in ways that are harmful to both yourself or others. This can include binge-drinking, being reliant on drugs and medication, having thoughts of harming yourself or others, or being unable to perform basic care for yourself (eg. bathing, eating). Talk to someone you trust or a social service professional if you find yourself or your loved one responding to grief in detrimental ways. ♥