

INFANT & CHILD DEATH



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Children. The hope for the future. The expectation, excitement, overwhelm, hope, love and, sometimes, the dread, fear or panic when it is discovered that a little person is coming into your family. Of all the imagined futures you envision, death likely was not a part of it. Having a child die goes against everything that is good. Children have the essence of innocence, lightness, play and wonder. For death to enter into that just feels beyond brutal.

We dream of our children having long and full lives, with all the good things life can give them. For that dream to be shattered before it's even begun feels so senseless and tragic. We expect our children to outlive us, never to outlive them. It's not how it should be. When the unimaginable happens, there can be such a sense of not feeling real, like you have entered a nightmare that you are waiting to wake up from with the reassurance that everything and everyone is okay. A feeling of numbness and detachment, with everything feeling like a haze. There can be a feeling of exhaustion that comes with grief, which doesn't seem to lift. And in the fleeting moments when you do sleep, vivid dreams can be prominent as your brain tries to make sense of what has happened.

Throughout the day, you may experience flashbacks, or find your thoughts drawn back into the past, replaying circumstances again and again. As parents, we are wired to protect our children, so when a death occurs, no matter the circumstances, there can be a feeling of having failed, of letting them down; and that can feel all-consuming. The "if only" wonderings play out in technicolour, as your mind tries to grapple and make sense of something so far removed from the previous reality. The yearning for your child - to be with them, to scoop them up into your arms - can feel overwhelming, like a physical pain radiating throughout your body.

Even the things that were previously so simple can now feel paralyzing and difficult. Having to make decisions can create panic and a sense of anger or overwhelm. Self-doubt can also be magnified, where you second-guess every decision you make. It can be challenging being around others who have children the same age, and it can be awkward and difficult in social settings when you are asked, "How many children do you have?".

Navigating grief can also look different for each family, with each family member processing and expressing their grief in their own way. In particular, Mothers and Fathers can be quite different in how they talk about and process their grief. Sometimes one will prefer not to talk as much but will lean more into activity, action and doing. The other may be more prone to talk and cry through their emotions. Due to these differences, some parents can feel lonely in their grief, assuming that the other parent is not grieving as deeply as they themselves are due to them grieving in a different way.

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If you also have other children who are grieving their sibling, their grief can also have its own uniqueness. Sometimes it is just having other children to care for that keeps getting you up each day. To care for and help them throughout their pain keeps you going. There can also be a heightened desire to protect your children in the face of their pain, especially in a world where nothing feels safe or secure anymore. This can sometimes come out in over-protection and wanting to draw them in extra close and keep them safe. Children can have mixed responses to this, which can be an extra challenge to navigate throughout your grief. Please see our other resources for how to best support grieving children and some things that can be helpful in their grief.

Ultimately, grief changes you. It changes your relationships. It changes your family. It takes you all through a valley you never wanted to journey through. Grief becomes a lifelong companion. You will always grieve your child. Sometimes the grief will be all-consuming; other days, it will be more in the background, existing as a constant companion alongside your daily activities, but not centre stage. Your grief may also bounce around, from grieving the past to grieving a future that is now lost, to grieving the present that is. There are so many layers to grief.

Nothing will ever 'fix' your grief, but there are some activities that some parents have found helpful in honouring and remembering their child. Some ideas include: writing a journal, making a scrapbook or memory box, writing poetry, pressing flowers, creating a special garden, having jewellery made connected to their child (their fingerprint or with their ashes), having a sketch of their child made, or having their child's name written in calligraphy (or in the sand at the beach at sunset).

For others, it is running a marathon, starting a not-for-profit, joining a support group with other bereaved parents, educating people around a particular issue or fighting for a cause. There are many unique ways of honouring and remembering your child. Find what makes most sense for who you are, and be gentle with yourself. It is a rough journey, and you are getting through each day, each step throughout the day, with more fragile courage than anyone else could ever possibly know.

