

Surviving the Death of a Baby

GRIEF RESOURCES FROM FIRST CANDLE



Somewhere there is a field

of lovely Forget Me Nots,

Delicate blooms for lives lost too soon,

Echoing *Forget Me Not*.

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WHEN A BABY HAS DIED...



No matter how deep your grief and how great your pain, remember that you are not alone. First Candle, as well as others who have traveled this road before you, are here to help you through the difficult time following the death of your baby.

When a baby dies, hopes and dreams are shattered and lives are forever changed. Initial feelings of shock and confusion are combined with questions: What happened? Why me?

Many times, the lack of answers to these questions adds to the overwhelming feelings of grief and helplessness. These intense emotions are real and a normal part of grieving. Grief is a process of trying to cope with your loss and make meaning out of life without your baby.

Grieving is not easy. It is long, unpredictable and requires a lot of patience. But it is necessary if you are to work through the pain toward healing.

Your life has been forever changed; you have questions and are searching for ways to cope. We hope you will find the information contained in this packet helpful.

Remember, you are not alone.
We are here to light a path through
the darkness toward hope and healing.

Please let us know what we can do.

PARENTS & THE GRIEVING PROCESS

Grief is an intense, lonely, and personal experience. Everyone learns about grief and grieving in the course of natural separation that occurs during infancy and childhood and through their encounters with the deaths of loved ones. The death of an elderly loved one is mourned, but is usually expected. The sudden death of a child, however, is an unexpected event. When a child dies, not only does it destroy the dreams and hopes of the parents, but it also forces all family members to face an event for which they are unprepared. Most parents who experience the death of a child describe the pain that follows as the most intense they have ever experienced. Many parents wonder if they will be able to tolerate the pain, to survive it, and to be able to feel that life has meaning again.

The intense pain that parents experience when their child dies may be eased somewhat if they have insight into what has helped other parents overcome a similar grief. For example, one of the most important things for parents to realize is that recovery from the loss of a child takes time. Each person will have to establish his or her own method of recovery. There is no right or wrong way to grieve, but there is a pattern to the resolution of grief, and there is help available to family members. It is crucial that parents realize that they are not alone and that others have experienced such grief and have survived.

Often the first reaction of a parent after the death of a child is of shock, disbelief, denial, or numbness. These reactions are instinctive and soften the impact of the death until the parent is better prepared to face the reality and the finality of the child's death. These reactions, as normal as they are, can be deceptive to others who are unacquainted with the grieving process. They may incorrectly assume that the parent either is strong and holding up well, or is insensitive and incapable of expressing his or her feelings about the loss. What they fail to realize is that shock, disbelief, denial, and numbness allow the parents to begin to face the tragic occurrence without losing control. Many parents have said that they seem to be "functioning in a fog" during the first few weeks after their child's death. "Some parents describe their experience at the wake or funeral as 'being an observer' or 'not really (being) emotionally involved.'" ¹ All of these reactions are nature's way of helping the parents confront the death of the child. These reactions may last minutes, hours, days, or weeks. The parent will determine subconsciously when he or she is better able to face the death. Crying, or some similar emotional release, usually marks the end of this initial period of grief.

When the child's death becomes a reality to the family, intense suffering and pain usually begin. During the weeks and months that follow, many parents say that they are frightened by the intensity and the variety of the feelings that they experience. Crying, weeping, and incessant talking are all normal reactions. The parent may find that he or she feels very alone. Parents may express their grief differently and may have difficulty sharing their feelings. Relatives and friends may be uncomfortable with the actuality of death, may be busy with their own lives, or may be unable to meet the parent's needs for comfort and support. For some parents, help may be obtained from the clergy, physician, counselors, other bereaved parents, or willing friends and relatives. It is important to remember, however, that no one can resolve the parent's grief but the parents themselves. Resolution can be achieved only by experiencing and working through these emotions.

It is important for the parents to allow themselves full expression of the emotions they feel. It is vital that emotions not be held in for a "correct time." It is necessary for parents to express their emotions, though not necessary in words, to gain a resolution to their child's death. Emotions that parents may experience include anger, guilt, fear, and depression.

Guilt. As the parents try to understand the reason their child died, they may develop feelings of guilt. Parents may blame themselves for something they did in the present or the past, or for something they neglected to do. In addition, each parent might blame the other. “If only” becomes a familiar phrase. Many times parents feel guilty when thinking of all that they wish they had done with their child. For instance, a father may feel guilty for not having spent more time with his child. Guilty feelings may also arise in the mother who thinks, “If only I hadn’t returned to work.” It can be extremely beneficial for parents to talk with people who will encourage the expression of these feelings of guilt, and can help them to understand those feelings more clearly.

Anger. Depending on his or her personality, a parent may express feelings ranging from mild anger to rage. Parents can feel angry –at themselves, their spouse, the physician, or the child for having died. Religious beliefs may be questioned and parents may find themselves angry with a God who allows children to die. These thoughts, though normal and experienced by many grieving parents, may cause an extreme amount of anxiety. Anger that is left unreleased may be suppressed and may manifest itself at an inappropriate time or place or in an inappropriate manner. Anger can be expressed healthily and worked through in a number of ways: screaming in private, hitting something, or strenuous exercise.

Fear. After the death of their child, many parents experience an overall sense of fear that something else horrible is going to happen. Often, parents with older children become extremely overprotective of them. At the same time, they may find themselves fearful of their responsibilities. After the death of their child, many parents find it is difficult to concentrate for any length of time. Their minds wander, making it difficult to read, write or make decisions. Sleep may be disrupted, leaving parents overtired and edgy. Even if getting enough sleep, parents may still feel exhausted. Those in grief may experience physical symptoms centering on the heart, in the stomach, or throughout muscles. Many times parents feel an irresistible urge to escape. As normal as all these reactions are, grieving parents often fear that they are “going crazy.” Talking about these feelings with other parents who have experienced a similar loss can be extremely helpful for some grieving parents.

Depression. As the parents continue to work through their grief, depression often occurs. Depression can take different forms for different parents. Some parents may feel constantly “down,” unhappy or sad; others may feel worthless or as though somehow they have failed. Many are continually lethargic, tired or listless. This may be an ideal time for parents, with the help of family or friends, to become involved in some type of activity. Caution should be taken to avoid frantic activity, which, like running away, avoids facing the reality of the child’s death. Grieved parents, in the midst of deep depression, may feel that life has little meaning for them. Aching arms, hearing the child cry, or continuing with routine tasks of caring for the child are all normal experiences for grieving parents. As the parents begin to recover, depression will lift slowly. “Down” times will come and go, but the time between “downs” will become longer. It’s a long, slow process that may take years. But resolution and recovery will come.

“No matter how deep the sorrow, you are not alone. Others have been there and will help share your load if you will let them. Do not deny them the opportunity.”²

Resolution and Recovery

As the finality of the child’s death becomes a reality for the parents, recovery occurs. Parents begin to take an active part in life and their lives begin to have meaning once more. The pain of their child’s death becomes less intense but not forgotten. Birthdays, holidays, and the anniversary of the child’s death can trigger periods of intense pain and suffering. As time passes, the painful days become less frequent. There is no set time in which recovery takes place after a child dies. The only comforting thought that one can give a parent is that it does occur, the process is slow, but it will happen. Parents need to be patient and loving with themselves, their spouses, and their families.

¹Miles, M.S. *The Grief of Parents When a Child Dies, Compassionate Friends*, Oak Brook, IL 1978. ²Jensen, A.H. *Healing Grief*, Medic Publishing Co., P.O. Box O, Issaquah, WA, 1980.

Grief Reactions of Parents May Be Different

Mothers and fathers express their grief in different ways. This fact is not always understood. For instance, mothers generally need to “talk out” their grief, while fathers tend to suffer in silence.

Parents working outside the home are diverted by their work, while parents working as homemakers are surrounded by constant reminders. Fathers may find it more difficult to ask for help and support from others and may seek diversions through their work; they may even take on extra work to escape “thinking about it all the time.”

Often, the loss of the baby is the first grief situation either parent has experienced. Grief is so intense that they find themselves struggling for ways to relate to each other as well as to their friends and relatives. In order to prevent misunderstanding, most families find it helpful to maintain an atmosphere in which their feelings can be discussed openly, even though that is difficult.

Coping with Birthdays, Anniversaries and Holidays

In the beginning, the day of the week and the hour your baby died will be the most difficult times. After a while, the date of death in each month will have significance. Later it will stretch out to other dates such as your baby’s birthday or the anniversary of your baby’s death. Holidays and other family celebrations may also be painful reminders to you about your baby who is gone. Sometimes, the anticipation of these events is worse than the actual day. Unfortunately, it’s hard for many of us to predict how we might feel.

What’s most important, and sometimes most difficult, is to decide for yourself what you want to happen on those days. Special days are often family-oriented, focusing on togetherness, plans for the future and remembrances of the past. These can be painful; yet at other times, you may find this togetherness acceptable and even comforting.

You may find consolation in long-held family holiday traditions, you may want to do everything different, or you may decide to “get away from it all” this year. Let others know your needs, limits and feelings. Don’t be afraid to ask for help and support. First Candle can provide you with suggestions of how other families have commemorated individual days.

Even though you want to believe that you will recover quickly and completely from the death of your baby, that is rarely the case. It is a journey that takes time and much work. As time passes, the difficult days become less frequent and the pain less intense. There is no magic date such as a one or five-year anniversary, when you will feel instantly healed. Some of the pain might always be with you, as will the memory of your baby. Milestone events of other children, family and friends (such as 16th birthdays, graduations, weddings, etc.) may trigger emotions and reopen old wounds. Healing, gaining perspective, finding hope and living on have different meanings for everyone. Though each person must heal at his or her own speed and in his or her own way, remember that others share your sorrow, know your pain, have lived through this, and are here to help.

Another Baby....Maybe?

Maybe you are one of the many people trying for another baby soon after a baby has died. It’s natural—you want to fill your empty arms and heart. Yet you may feel frightened that the next baby will die as well. You will need to figure out how long to wait and what seems right for you. For many parents, the thought of having another baby brings comfort. Others comment that they feel they are betraying their baby who has died. The “right” time to embark on this will vary depending on your individual circumstances. Trust yourself about the timing.

When a baby dies, well-intentioned people often try to persuade parents that having another baby as soon as possible is the only way to accept that death and to heal. If you had infertility problems or other losses this advice may seem especially cruel. But “healing” is actually nothing more than incorporating an event into your life in a way that enables you to live with it. Doing that takes time. You cannot necessarily speed up the process of healing by having or not having another baby.

If you decide not to have another baby and that decision is based upon your own reasons, be secure with the fact that this decision is right for you. If you decide not to have another baby, but you think this decision is based more on fear than on practical considerations, do not hesitate to seek some counseling. You will not be the first or the last person to experience this feeling.

If you are expecting a baby, you will probably be excited as well as afraid. It is hard to be patient. It's also unfair to have to wait and go through this all again. Building a good support system can really help. Talk with your doctor or another health professional; you can also contact First Candle. Speaking with other bereaved parents who have had subsequent children may help. Search within your group of relatives and friends for people who will listen to your fears, not give you lots of unsolicited advice. Reviewing the facts about sudden infant deaths and reducing the risks may also be reassuring.

For lack of a better term, your next child has been called the “subsequent child.” This new child is indeed a very special one, to you and to everyone else. The birth of a subsequent child can be an overwhelming emotional experience. When you see and hold your new baby for the first time, you may find that difficult memories come flooding back and intermingle with the pleasure you are feeling. The moment can be a mixture of great joy and intense pain.

Will you spend twenty-four hours a day by the crib? The answer is no. Even if you try, eventually you will get tired; which isn't good for you or your baby. That is when you learn to trust—in living, in yourself and your values. You will probably check on your sleeping baby more frequently than you did your other children. Parents of subsequent children are the first to admit that in the past they used to check their babies to see if they were covered, whereas now they check breaths and heartbeats. Many babies are quiet sleepers; a gentle hand on the tummy can reassure you. Babies do pause in their breathing periodically and sometimes pant for a breath or two. If you remember this, you will spare yourself some moments of uneasiness.

The most uncomfortable period will be the point when your pregnancy or subsequent baby nears the age of the baby who died. It is one of those milestones that has to be reached and passed. Once it is, most parents report that their moments of uneasiness start to decrease. Most of all, be assured that you are not the only person to experience discomfort or panic. Nearly everyone does. You can only do your best in finding ways to handle it. If you find that you are feeling uneasy most of the time, be sure to consult your doctor, other health professional or First Candle for some additional help.

The success of your pregnancy and/or the birth of your newborn represents hope, and a promise of the continuity of life. Joy and sorrow are memories in your life that enable you to know the importance of hope. Many parents have weathered the crises, panic, and great joy of their subsequent child's infancy. They acknowledge that while it was not always easy and that they had to work at handling their emotions, their effort was rewarded by one of the most wonderful periods in their lives.

CHILDREN'S REACTIONS TO DEATH

Brothers and sisters will also be affected deeply by the death of the baby. Smaller children who are too young for explanations need only to be shown love and affection by their parents. They may have some very frightening thoughts that they cannot express. (Did I cause the baby to die? Will I die too? Will Mommy and Daddy die? Am I still a big sister or brother? Who will take care of me now?) They may cling to their parents and do other things to get attention. It is most important for them to know that they are loved and secure.

Older brothers and sisters experience grief reactions which may vary depending on their ages and past experiences. Sometimes they feel guilty because they mistakenly think they may have caused the baby's death. They may be very sad or may appear not to have any feelings.

Children should be told as much about the facts as they are able to understand. All older family members should be open to expressing their thoughts and feelings. This openness will enable the children to express how they feel and to ask questions about the death. It is best not to say, "The baby went away," or "The baby is sleeping in peace." It is important to explain that this type of death occurs only in very little babies and not in older children or adults.

Many youngsters have been sources of strength for their families. They have written poetry and often exhibit simple, unshakable faith about the pattern of life and death. Some children, on the other hand, because of circumstances of age or emotional makeup, have felt terrible insecurity after a sibling's death. This loss of security has manifested itself in nightmares, bed-wetting, difficulty in school and other disturbances. Any such problems should be discussed with the child's doctor. Other bereaved parents can also offer practical tips and reassurance.

Lines of communication about the death should be kept open for years since children's questions and ability to understand change as they develop. They will need more complete information over time.

Some Considerations about the Unique Effect of a SIDS or Other Sudden, Unexpected Infant Death on Children

When a sudden, unexpected death of a child occurs, the other children in the family or daycare setting are forced to deal with a most devastation situation. They may have had to deal with the initial shock and trauma when someone, perhaps even another child, found a baby dead who had previously seemed perfectly well; with the arrival of emergency personnel and other professionals; and with an atmosphere filled with many questions, doubts and, in some cases, suspicions. The surviving children often have seen the tears, heard the whispers, and noted the confusion, fright, shock, panic, and stress of the adults as well as the pained and unusual situation in the home or daycare center. Nobody was prepared for the death; nobody, adult or child, had a chance to say goodbye; all involved have many unmet grieving needs.

“Because parents have such a hard time coming to grips with a SIDS (loss themselves). ..and because there is NO explanation, this type of death is especially hard to explain to children. ..Hugging, answering questions, and crying together. Sometimes that’s all you can do. It will be a long time before (a) family will be able to make sense out of this...if ever. For a long time all will be struggling with feelings of guilt and grief and the question, “What happened?” (*Schaefer*) “It is normal for both adults and children to feel unexplained confusion and rage about an unexplained death like SIDS.” (*Horchler*)

Reminders for Adults Dealing with Grieving Children

That the varied reactions of children to death are normal expressions of grief and usually not signs of disturbed behavior; that sometimes children react by being mad, when indeed they are really sad, by expressing anger, when it is really doubt or confusion they are feeling; that children may lash out at a parent or caregiver because they think adults could/should have prevented the death; that children may grieve in spurts, crying one moment, laughing the next; that children do not know what is considered appropriated behavior at a time such as this; and that grieving is a very complex process for all.

To acknowledge the grief of children; to allow children to confront the death; to let children mourn; to let children know that their grief will not be discounted or considered unimportant; to let children know that talking about or even act out the death is okay; “Children must not become the forgotten mourners. ..they must be included in the mourning process, or else they will feel their grief is not important.” (*Wolfelt*) Adults should not underestimate what most children can grasp about death, for children can usually absorb the information and adjust it to fit their understanding of what happened.

NOT to delay talking about what happened; to encourage children to talk about the death immediately and frequently and in whatever way is most comfortable, even if this means that they go over the event repeatedly.

That the passage of time is perhaps THE most important healing factor in the grief process. (Experts on early childhood development indicate that it takes at least six months for a normal routine to resume after the death of someone significant in a child’s life; that frequently the worst time for survivors is about six months after the death; and that the first year is usually the hardest in a family situation.)

To show visible signs of love, support, and caring to surviving children using physical signs of affection such as frequent hugging or warm verbal expressions of support or concern. (In family situations, it may be helpful for all to grieve openly together, for adults to show children that they need not be afraid to talk about the child who died or show open signs of emotion, such as sadness or tears.)

That in most critical situations, including the death of someone close, the best way for adults to deal with children is with honesty in language that they can understand using simple, easily understood answers. (DO NOT use dishonest or evasive terms or expressions such as “he went away,” or “God wanted your sister with Him because she was so good,” or “your friend when to sleep.”)

To make special effort to really listen to what children are saying or trying to say, helping them to express doubts, thoughts, or questions, if necessary, and not trying to put your thoughts and feelings into words for them. (Adults also need to notice what children are not expressing, for these omissions may be of equal importance in trying to understand what children are really thinking or feeling.)

That it is okay to tell children, “I can’t give you a good answer. There is no explanation” or “No, it isn’t fair that this happened to your brother or friend” or “I worry about that, too.” (When the death of a child occurs, adults are often placed in the position of trying to explain to children something they themselves don’t understand.)

To encourage children to talk to each other about the loss, as grieving children can be a great source of help and comfort to each other.

To allow children to express memories or recollections of the child who has died, for example, by starting a book, diary, or journal of thoughts or feelings or a box or photo album of mementos; by remembering the deceased child in art or drawings; by telling stories about the child; by directing children in playing games or in other activities in which they express the loss; and by remembering the child who died on special days such as birthdays and holidays.

To permit children to express the concerns they have, not only for themselves, but for the child who died and/or for their parents or other family members; to allow surviving children to be a source of comfort to others, even adults. (At times like this, children often express concern for the other significant people in their lives.)

To allow children who are old enough or who express a wish to do so to be included in memorial services, for rituals are a part of life and a source of help in building memories of the child who died. (It is important to explain to children beforehand what a funeral is and to take special care to mention that rituals such as this provide grieving family and friends a time, place, and occasion to remember the child who died and a way to say good-bye.)

To obtain helpful books or other informational materials to explain death and/or memorial or funeral services to children. (The use of examples familiar to children such as the loss of a pet or reference to the cycles of nature may prove helpful in teaching children about death and helping them to understand that death, after all, is part of the cycle of every living thing.)

To try, as far as possible, to maintain a normal routine, as children need the security of knowing that their world remains intact but that life, although changed, goes on.

That there are special grief situations that require special responses or information, such as the death of a twin, the unique but complicated grief of teenagers, or when explaining the death to a subsequent child at a later date.

That, as adults, they are the role models for grieving children, even if they are mourning themselves. The display of legitimated emotions, such as tears, controlled anger, or fear, doesn't harm children. What is harmful is denying grief, refusing to talk or let others talk about the death, the display of irrational anger or guilt, or extending blame after the loss. Parents and other adults in grief need to show children open and compassionate ways to mourn. It is not only OK but necessary for all who knew and treasured the child who died to grieve. But children are unusually sensitive to the emotions of the adults around them and will imitate these reactions, especially in unfamiliar situations.

The four most important concepts adults should remember when helping children understand about and cope with death are:

Be Truthful. Be Loving. Be Accepting. Be Consistent.

General Comments on Children and Grief

Because children are often so open and honest in asking questions and expressing their feelings, they can and often do teach adults a lot about grief. Children, as they learn how to receive comfort, can learn how to give comfort in return; they can often show others compassionate and spontaneous ways to grieve; and at times they can be the ones to make adults confront and deal with a death and some of its unanswered questions.

But most of all at this time, children themselves need understanding, a patient attitude, compassion, and love from the adults around them. Supportive responses and frequent gestures of care and concern from adults to grieving children can result in a sad time, a time of crisis and pain, becoming a way "to help prepare (adults and children) for losses yet to come. Formortal as we all are, they will come" (*Kubler-Ross in Fitzgerald*). "Communication patterns in the family determine the way in which the surviving members are able to live with the sad and joyful memories of the dead child and with their combined and separate understanding. ..of (the death)."(*Arnold*)

Children are intimately involved in the loss. They cannot and should not be dismissed. Adults MUST "become aware of the tremendous importance of being truthful, open, and caring, the importance of allowing children to ask questions, and confirm the reality of confronting them; the importance of allowing them to go through the painful but therapeutic process of grief." (*Kubler-Ross in Fitzgerald*) Accept their feelings, fears, reactions, and questions while allowing them to share your grief, your fears, your tears.

The way a death in a family or childcare center is handled can have a lasting, even lifelong impression on a child. Every member of the family or the group is affected by the death, from the oldest to youngest. The response and understanding shown at this time can affect whether children come to learn to trust or distrust adults and how they come to value family, friendships, loving, communication, life, and, of course, death. "All caregivers can play a positive role in facilitating healthy mourning among grieving children so that they may heal and grow emotionally, intellectually, and socially, thereby strengthening them to live life to its fullest." (*Pine, et al.*) If children are allowed to grieve openly and freely at the time of the loss, they will be better prepared to deal with other losses and challenges as they grow older. "Not learning to mourn well can result in not loving or living well." (*Wolfelt*) Experts know that children's grief, like that of adults, cannot be cured, but must be worked through, and that grief is a part of healing, a life-long process. Children must know that it is legitimated, healthy, and even courageous to express grief. Grief is a form of suffering and it needs to be admitted. "Grief is not an illness, but a part of life." (*Wolfelt*)

When a death occurs in a family or childcare center, changes do take place, and they must be acknowledged. But also children need to know that some things will not change—that there is continuity and consistency. Most of all, surviving children need to know that the child who died will not be forgotten, but will always be cherished and remembered. That child was and is part of the family or group history. Surviving children also need to know that they are still valued—that they belong and are still cherished. “Although grief is a universal emotion, coping with it is a skill that must be acquired” (*Newsweek*). Adults, even though grieving themselves, must help the children in their care to accomplish this.

WHEN A GRANDCHILD DIES

No one expects to outlive their own children, much less their grandchildren. It is so difficult to raise a family, see your children do the same, and see the cycle broken in this out-of-order way. No one is prepared for the grief that follows. As a grandparent, you have a double grief. You grieve for your grandchild who has died, as well as for your own child who is now a bereaved parent. You not only feel your own pain and sadness, but also feel helpless and frustrated at not being able to help your bereaved child.

It helps to remember that there is no timetable for grief. Don't expect too much of your child, his or her spouse or of yourself. At first, no one believes it. When the reality "hits" everyone feels even more devastated. It is important to consider your needs as well as those of your bereaved child. Acknowledging and working on your grief will help you and, indirectly, your grieving child.

Don't be surprised if at first you can't reach out to your grieving child. Remember that you are grieving. Be patient with yourself. Eventually you may be able to talk, listen and help. If you find that you can't help specifically with the grief you can send cards, tell them that you love them, etc. Explain that you wish that you could be of more help but that you don't know what to do.

Suggestions for Helping Yourself and Your Grieving Child (the Parents)

- Read about grief. It is important to understand what you and your child are experiencing.
- It helps to be open and share your feelings. Your openness sets a good example for your child. Share the good memories and the good days as well as the pain of grief and the bad days.
- Talk about your dead grandchild. Mention his/her name.
- Find someone with whom you can talk freely — a friend, support group member, clergy or counselor.
- Be available to LISTEN frequently to your child. Respect your child's way of handling the pain and expressing the grief. Don't tell your child how he or she should react.
- At special times (anniversary of death, birthdays, holidays) write and/or call your bereaved child (and his or her spouse). Mention that you realize what day it is. You are calling to say you love them and you wish that you could take some of their pain away.
- When adults are grieving, the child's siblings often feel neglected — plus they don't understand the grief that they themselves are experiencing. Try to spend extra time with your other bereaved grandchild(ren), offering to listen and reminding them that they are very important and much loved.
- If possible, offer to take surviving grandchildren for an afternoon or a day; help with practical matters, such as preparing food, doing laundry, shopping; spend time alone with your child.
- Most of us need hugs, even if we don't recognize that we do. It helps to hug and hold your child if you both are comfortable doing so.
- Allow yourself and encourage your child to cry when needed. Crying offers relief.
- Let the family know that you care; that you love them.
- Hold on to HOPE that eventually you/they will enjoy life again. Offer HOPE to your grieving child and family.

From *Hope Bereaved Handbook*, available from HOPEFORBEREAVED; 1342 Lancaster Avenue; Syracuse, New York 13210; (315) 472-6754; Adapted from the website of the *Alliance of Grandparents, A Support in Tragedy*, 2004.

FOR FATHERS

The Myth of Silence

The modern image of a man has certainly evolved from our culture. More and more we have seen an enigma on how a 'man' is supposed to behave. Long gone is the image of yesteryears of a man off to work and wife stays at home tending to household duties and mothering the children. Fatherhood seemed to be somewhat more of a hat or a role that men put on. Children approached dad as they would approach a boss or manager. Social rules were more defined and clear cut. It was well known how children were to behave around parents, how women were to behave in front of men and, in retrospect, how men behave toward women and children.

Over the years, we have literally seen an evolution, a shifting of social expectations between men and women. More women have gone out into the work force, become co-workers with fellow men. We have seen more men participating and being active in the home. However, there is still a paradigm that still has not followed the tide as closely despite the age of information that has been passed down. There is still a stereotype that plagues men despite our modernization. To this very day, tears are still considered as a sign of weakness. Still prevalent is the myth of the 'strong silent type'. Media still shows successful, virile heroes as masculine anyone who is able to face any situation head on with either rational or excessive violent passion. All we need to consider are past blockbusters as the *Rambo* and *Rocky* series, the popular Schwarzenegger films, *Braveheart* and more recently *300*. However, submitting to such stereotype also may cause conflict, not only within ourselves, but with our significant other.

When grieving the loss of your baby, it is natural to want to 'keep it together' for the sake of our partner. And that is certainly a plausible cause. However, grief is patient, and if left unattended, will rear her embrace soon enough. In fact, it is reported that the average man usually experiences the severe pangs of grief six months after the initial event. This is partly due to our setting aside our own feelings to take care of and protect the mother and any bereaved children. This is okay, as we are instinctively hardwired to protect our family in such a manner. But heed the warning, do not ignore the grief. In fact, I would encourage embracing it as quickly as possible. To accept your loss is not about trying to block the loss out of your mind. Instead, it has to do with realizing that the loss will change your world, and that you're still meant to have a whole and healthy life in this new and different world. This new world is composed of a new 'normal', one without your baby. You can identify all your losses in your brain, but true grieving requires you to use your heart.

To be silent may be golden, but to stay silent may be costly. Love's natural tendency is to flow outwardly with expressions such as smiles, kisses, touch and comfort. Grief is also one that has a natural nature, one of sorrow, loneliness and isolation. But the healing process is the voice and crying of sorrow and pain. A man needn't feel ashamed of the tears shed, for every tear that I have shed for the loss of my little girl was the result of my love for little Zoe. What father doesn't share a special place for a much-loved, much-wanted child? A tear shed before your partner serves to confirm that she is not alone in her grief and sorrow; that this is not just a bad dream to awaken from, but reality that you are willing to walk through with her.

Indeed, a man's courage and strength is not measured by how strong and silent he remains, but his strength is measured by the compassion and tears he is able to share. The shortest verse found in the Bible is located in John 11 verse 35 where only two words are written, "Jesus wept". Whether you believe that He is fact or fiction is immaterial, the fact is that entire civilizations, laws, moral compasses and teachings were formed based on this Man. Certainly, if He was able to shed a tear, I can too.

How We Might Be

Grieving is a way to put our world back together. Grieving heals the open wounds left by the death of our baby. This healing comes about by the expression of emotion and talking. Emotion left buried stagnates and festers. Unresolved grief may cause serious emotional and physical problems. Many men have to and must re-learn roles, which will encourage expression of grief. These re-learned roles include:

Talk to Your Family. Don't leave your wife out. As mentioned before, two may bear the stone of grief much easier than one. Spend time together with her and your other children. Let them know you are doing what you are able to do; that you want them to help.

Have Quality Alone Time. Sort out the millions of questions tumbling about in your mind. Think about your loss. Figure out the what's and why's. Gradually answers will come. Consider the use of a journal and write down your thoughts. As the days go by, read what was written before.

Decrease Social Activities. Many men will look for new hobbies or social activities. This only serves to take time away from grief work. Back off from added responsibilities. Remember, you really cannot back away from your emotions. Give yourself the time that is needed for grief work.

Cry. Crying is an effective way of dealing with the painful emotions of grief. Many men will have difficulty with crying. It may be okay to do so during the funeral, but what about at home? Don't suppress the lump in your throat or tears that want to come. Crying actually makes one feel better as though some tension has been released from within the body.

Express Anger. Express your anger in constructive ways. Ignoring or denying anger does not make it go away. It is difficult to decide with whom to be angry: your wife, the doctor? None of you deserve any blame. Some have said that it is okay to be angry with God, that He is big enough to take it.

There are many ways to express anger in physical ways that are not harmful to yourself or others. Exercise is one. Body movement and the awareness of how you feel during such movement may be helpful.

Find a Support System. This could be the hardest thing for a man to do. To admit to others that he needs help. It may be easier to do if you look for other bereaved fathers who have gone through the same thing you are now experiencing. Parent support meetings may also help to see how other families in various stages of grief are coping. What a support group can give to you is the knowledge that you are not alone —others have been there also.

How We Know We Are Making It

"Time heals all" is a common cliché that is heard. This is true only in part. Time, work and knowledge help to heal. So, how do you know you're getting better? The following are some ways to assess the outcomes of your grief work.

- You become less introverted. You look outside of yourself and see how others in your family are dealing with the loss.
- You are able to live with yourself and the emotions within you. You learn more about yourself and the intensity of emotion is lessened.

- You have times without emotional stress. There is freedom of thought and joy in thinking about other things. This should not make you feel guilty; you are not betraying the memory of your child — simply learning to live with it.
- You become more comfortable with your grief. Ups and downs begin to stabilize and you are able to talk about your loss.
- You begin to feel less depressed. Depression may manifest itself as anger, anxiety, indecision, helplessness, and physical disturbances. Do not confuse sadness with depression. Sadness does not disturb your daily activities.
- You begin to act in traditional manly ways. You become surer of yourself. The concern is that these male roles do not become a shell to protect from the pain and grief.
- You realize that you and your wife did your best. There is no blame.
- You begin to see meaning in life. You begin to laugh and enjoy life.

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CHILDCARE PROVIDERS

While the majority of sudden infant deaths occur at home, as more and more mothers return to work, an increasing number of infant deaths are occurring in childcare settings. Because childcare providers have often become an extension of the baby's family, a baby's death may cause feelings of grief for the care provider which mirrors those felt by a parent. Coupled with grief are feelings of fear that they may be blamed for the baby's death, and concern for the reactions of other children (and their families) in their care.

Despite reassurances from the family, counselors, and healthcare or other professionals, the death of a baby in childcare may leave providers hesitant to care for other infants. Sometimes childcare providers are so overcome with grief or lack of self-confidence after a death that they will leave the profession entirely.

Accurate information about sudden infant deaths and reducing the risks, peer support and counseling for all of those affected by a baby's death are essential. Information and referral to local contacts for support are available through [First Candle](http://www.firstcandle.org).

REMEMBERING YOUR BABY

For family members and friends, the death of a baby is heartbreaking. At First Candle, we are pleased to offer you several ways that you can remember and honor the memory of a precious baby or loved one. For more information on any of these memorial opportunities, email info@firstcandle.org or call 1-203-966-1300.

Memorial Gifts

The most common way of remembering a baby that has died is to make a donation in their name. If you are donating in memory of a baby other than your own, First Candle will also acknowledge the parents or family of the baby, letting them know that you have contributed in their baby's memory. You can donate through our website, www.firstcandle.org, by phone or by mail. All donations are tax-deductible.

With Us Forever Memorials

Another way for families to honor the baby is the First Candle Memorial Fund Program. The program makes available to family members and friends a named memorial fund through which contributions can be made to First Candle.

The program offers individuals the chance to memorialize a lost infant or loved one and at the same time provide ongoing support to help First Candle with its important mission. Memorial funds may be established for ongoing donations from an individual or group of individuals, and there is not a minimum gift requirement to establish a fund.

Additional information on how to set up a social memorial page can be found on our website.

First Candle Memorial Special Events

Special events are a great way to honor a baby year after year. Whether a golf outing, run/walk, dinner party or other creative idea, First Candle will work with you to bring your ideas to fruition.



Saving babies. Supporting families.

First Candle, Inc. is the nation's leading organization committed to promoting safe pregnancies and the survival of babies during the first years of life. We accomplish this mission with programs of research, education and advocacy, while at the same time providing compassionate grief support to all those affected by the death of a baby.

For more information, please call 203-966-1300 or visit www.firstcandle.org