

The loss of a child: a parent's grief

For any parent, whether married, single, or step-parent, the death of a child is devastating.

Whether it is a tiny baby, a young child, a teenager or a full grown adult with children of their own, the death of a son or daughter at any age is a parent's most painful and debilitating loss.

The death of anyone we love is agonising, but when our son or daughter dies, life is changed forever. Our children are 'not supposed' to die before us. We expect them to bury us - not the other way round. The ripping pain and seemingly endless waves of despair are not just for the immediate loss of their presence, but for all that we won't share with them for the rest of our lives. All we have invested in them - caring, providing, advising, problem solving - now seems wasted.

But there is light at the end of this dark valley. Grief, though painful, is a journey that can help us create a new life. It's a journey to a 'new normal' in which there is hope, meaning and joy again - a world in which our son or daughter is never forgotten, but is always a treasured part.

Barbie's story

We have three sons and two daughters. In 1993 our eldest daughter was expecting her first baby at Christmas and our eldest son, Simon (21), was working in South Africa. Two weeks before Christmas our first baby grandson, Timothy David, was still-born. One week later the new tyre on the truck Simon was driving burst. He died eighteen hours later. Our grandson and eldest son were both gone within a week.

After Simon died, I read what the 'experts' said about the 'stages of grief' because I wanted to 'get through this', to 'get over it' as quickly as possible. Foolishly I thought if I could just hurry the process we could 'get back to normal' and the terrible pain inside would go. It took a long time to realise that our family would never again be 'normal' as it had been before Simon died. We had to find a 'new normal'. We will feel his loss in different ways for the rest of our lives, like at weddings when we remember that he will never get married or have children of his own, and on special occasions when we miss his wonderful smiling face and his humour. Sometimes I just want to hug him and tell him I'm proud of him. But we have come to find new meaning in life again, with new hopes and joys. Simon and Timothy will always be part of who we have become. *Barbie*

A new normal?

Creating a 'new normal' takes time and is hard work. It's usual for most parents to take a long time to comprehend that their child has really gone. There can be an overwhelming sense of guilt as the parents blame themselves for just about everything to do with their relationship with and care of their child. Regret, and a deep sense of failure, can take a parent prisoner as they may feel that they didn't protect their child from death. Feelings go into overdrive - anger, helplessness, fear for remaining children, hurt, loss of control.

In addition, the way in which you view other people changes. Parents can be shocked at their own family's lack of sensitivity and support after the initial few weeks or months. They can feel awkward or different around other parents. Questions batter the senses - 'Why her?', 'Why now?', 'Why us?', 'Who am I now my child has died?', 'How can people laugh and carry on as normal?'

All of these feelings are normal after the death of a child of any age and whatever the cause of death. They will need to be talked and worked through over and over again. Grief ebbs and flows in intensity. It comes in waves and sometimes it feels like we're 'back in it again,' but each time we are moving onto a new level.

Barbie

Choices

We had no choice in our child's death, but we do have a choice in how we respond. How we react long-term is a memorial to our child. Will people remember your son or daughter for who they were or that their parents 'never got over it'?

We need never forget our sons and daughters. We will feel their loss painfully at different times throughout our lives, but we can learn to value what we have now and gain from our pain.

One father's story

We'd had a good family Christmas and Alistair had just started school when a series of mishaps alerted us to the possibility that something was wrong. Our GP admitted him to hospital where he was diagnosed with an aggressive brain tumour. We were stunned. We did not know where to turn or what to do. It was a huge strain remaining upbeat and cheerful in Alistair's presence whilst dealing with the reality that his short life was drawing to a close at the age of five.

The tumour continued its destructive growth and over the next ten days we saw Alistair slowly lose many of his normal functions. It was a particularly evident that his body was gradually shutting down when he couldn't even clean his teeth.

Helpless

I went through all the possible emotions: "Why him?" "Surely something could be done." A brief session of radiotherapy made no difference. The consultant was helpless, as indeed we all were. Alistair showed remarkable calmness throughout the ordeal. He even managed to climb in a playground and enjoy Burger King, all with a determination not to be defeated or to have any fuss.

Alistair asked his Mum if he would die. It was a heart rending question. Cath sat up with Alistair all night and in the morning I arrived to take over and allow her to get some rest. Alistair died peacefully in my arms shortly after, on 11 February 1999.

The following hours and days were, and still are, a blur. It was as if 'autopilot' kicked in - family, friends, funeral arrangements, and, of course, time for Alistair's brother. We had to assure him that he was safe, and help retain some

degree of 'normality'. Everything seemed to go at such a pace that I was swept along on adrenaline. Looking back, I was at my strongest during that brief time.

A hole in the family

After all the formalities and family had drifted away,

I was faced with the stark reality of a huge hole in our family. Alistair was so like me in looks, build, and, above all, his sense of humour. We had breakfast rituals and little daft jokes that were the bond between Dad and son. Now they were gone.

I cried every day for I don't know how long.

I also realised that Cath and I had little to say to each other, needing to grieve in our own way and space. The love and support of friends was so important in helping both of us keep things together.

I still feel the same sense of calmness over Alistair's death and have never been angry about his brief life being cut short. I would much rather have my little boy here with me, but am content with the knowledge that he is in a safe and loving place.

We are still standing, and are stronger for the ordeal. A sense of what really matters also prevails - life is too important to be wasted. Time does not heal, but gives space to cope.

A friend likened life to a bus journey where we all eventually get off to join in a great party in heaven. Alistair just got off early. He left his mark on so many people, touching their lives in positive ways. I know there were good reasons for Alistair being here - to bring sunshine and laughter. That is his legacy.

Nigel

The love and support of friends was so important

Mothers and fathers often respond differently

- Mothers of young children may feel the loss in a more total and physical way. Dads may not feel the 'aching arms' but rather the pain of not being able to 'fix' the situation.
- Fathers often feel it was their 'job' to protect their child and feel a particular shame and helplessness in 'failing' to do so.
- The death of an 'adult child' may mean the loss of a close friend or support.
- A strained relationship with the son or daughter who has died can be difficult to come to terms with for either parent.
- Different ways of grieving can cause misunderstanding between parents. Time and patience is needed to understand and accept that, though our partner may grieve differently, they didn't love our child any less.

Things some mums have said...

- "The order of my day had completely disappeared. An alarm in my head still sounded at 3pm although I no longer had a child to collect from school."
- "I felt that I was the one who had to hold everything together and 'make it better' for everyone."
- "I missed the physical closeness I longed to stroke the funny way his hair lay at the back of his neck!"
- "I hated shopping I got 'stuck' in the supermarket once. I froze at the yoghurt section when I couldn't remember who liked which flavour and which ones I didn't need to buy anymore. The desire to dump the trolley and run was overwhelming."
- "I don't have any answers as to why she died, but I know that my life has been enriched and totally changed by the gift of her life. I thank God for allowing me nineteen years with her."
- "School events are hard - being so aware of other children moving on without my child."

Barbara's story

I am a single parent and have three children now - Naomi (23), Jacob (11) and Isabel (7). My precious son Luke died aged 14 months and 29 days in a tragic accident on 29 November 2001.

Two weeks before Luke was born, my mother died suddenly and I went to Italy to bury her. My father spent the next 9 months over here with his children and grandchildren before returning to Italy in June 2001, but one month later he died suddenly. Luke and I went over to bury him. In October my ex husband, Naomi's father, died. One month later my son Luke died and at the same time, the father of Jacob, Isabel and Luke left us. I was numb and never believed I could survive or go on.

Amazing support

The support I got from the local Baptist church was amazing. Very soon after Luke's death a mum at church told me about the *Living with Loss* weekend run by Care for the Family and offered to have my children so that I could go. Reluctantly the next day I picked up the phone, called the number and told

some of my story. I recall a wonderful response of compassion and genuine urgency to help and support me immediately. Another bereaved parent phoned me and listened to my fears, my pain and my tears. She was wonderful and encouraged me about the weekend.

It was only six weeks after Luke's death that I went away on the *Living with Loss* weekend. It was the start of being able to find a new beginning, a new strength. My faith in God was rekindled and meeting with others, who knew, felt, understood and cried like I did, gave me an inner strength. The talks by Pete and Barbie were real and related to my experiences and emotions. The advice and help was not unreachable.

Hope for tomorrow

The belief in God they spoke about gave me a hope for tomorrow. Everyone I met and the things we learnt and shared were wonderful. I am so very glad that I had the privilege of attending *Living with Loss* so soon after losing Luke and would not have been able to cope without God and the support from Christians and *Care for the Family*.

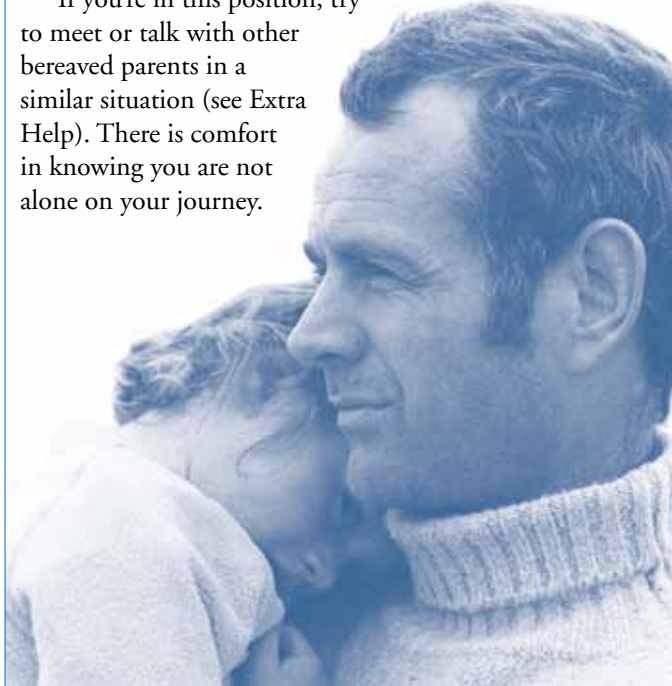
A lone parent's grief

Married couples may struggle to understand each other but for parents on their own, being alone feels unbearable at times.

One lone parent said, "At least you've got someone to shout at! When you can't take it any more you can walk out and leave your partner to cope with the kids for a while - but everything depends on us. There is no let up."

Another lone parent said, "People say we're brave, but we don't want to be brave. We have no choice. We *have* to carry on. You have no-one to share your grief with, no-one with whom to measure how well you're doing."

If you're in this position, try to meet or talk with other bereaved parents in a similar situation (see Extra Help). There is comfort in knowing you are not alone on your journey.



A Step-parent's grief

I knew my stepson for the last two thirds of his life. He kept in touch with his father and me on a regular basis although he never lived with us.

After he died, differences in the grieving process seemed small, as the knowledge I have of my stepson's early life arises from memories which my husband has related to me. My sense of loss for this period is 'second-hand' and contained within my imagination.

I never knew my husband without his son and daughter. So, as far as I was concerned, his children were part of him. I could see his likeness in them. Therefore, when my stepson died I felt as if part of my husband had also been permanently removed. I soon became afraid that the whole of my husband would be lost and I felt panicky if I was away from him for very long.

I could see how much my husband was affected by his loss and how much he seemed to have aged. I was now grieving the loss of my stepson *and* the loss of the husband I knew. People often asked me how my husband was doing, but did not enquire so much about me. I found this question very difficult to answer because my loss was different to his. Eventually, I tried to think how I was managing, and then told people that was how my husband was doing. Many seemed to think I would be strong for my husband, but it was as if they didn't know that I was devastated too.

I feel I am perhaps in a similar position to spouses of people diagnosed with a long term illness, or of a person sent to prison. My life has changed because of the crisis in my loved one. We are married and operate as a unit, not as individuals.
Menna

Above and beyond

Here are some quotes from people about special help that they have received which was felt to be 'above and beyond' their expectations and encouraged them so very much:

- "The school held a cake sale at the end of the summer term when Josh would have left - even though it was three years after his death."
- "Someone went to the Post Office to help with arrangements for cancelling the Child Benefit and was there to take over when it all became too much."
- "Someone who had never known my son asked to visit his grave with me and asked me to tell her about him. She wanted to get to know him."
- "A friend would call each week on her way home from work to scoop up the other two children for a while to give me a break."
- "Someone left a home-made pie on our doorstep each week for months."
- "Our church organised a 24-hour rota of friends available to talk to us day or night if we needed anything."
- "One church pastor sent a beautiful flower arrangement every anniversary of our son's death for the next six years."

"When my son died, it was as though the light had gone out in my life."

Some practical ways to support bereaved parents

- Spend time with the remaining children to give parents a break or some time alone.
- Following a stillbirth or neo-natal death, try to ensure their name has been removed from unwanted mailings about baby products by registering with the Baby Mailing Preference Service at <http://mpsonline.org.uk/bmpsr>
- Provide a meal rota for few weeks (or months) for the family.
- Remember birthdays and anniversaries - a phone call, a card or flowers can mean so much.
- Never tire of listening to bereaved parents talk. Events often need to be repeated so they become held securely in mind. It will help the parents to comprehend the reality of it all.
- Listen to the *happy* memories too and share some of your own.
- Offer to do ironing, vacuuming, shopping or other everyday tasks which may just be too much to cope with in the home.
- Be aware of milestones in future years - e.g. when the child would have started school, learned to drive, gone off to university etc.

"I didn't know it was possible to feel so much pain and still live."

Extra help

Support groups

The **Bereaved Parents' Network** is Care for the Family's support network for those who have lost a son or daughter, whatever the age or circumstance. It offers:

- A Day for Bereaved Parents.
- A Weekend for Bereaved Parents
- A regular email Newsletter
- Web based resources
www.careforthefamily.org.uk/bpn
www.careforthefamily.org.uk/supportnet

Details of other Bereavement Support Organisations can be found at: www.careforthefamily.org.uk/article/?article=434

Care for the Family also seeks to offer support to Single and Step families.

Further details at:

www.careforthefamily.org.uk/spf
www.careforthefamily.org.uk/stepfamily

For details of all networks, contact Care for the Family, Freepost (CF4636), Cardiff CF15 7GZ
Tel: (029) 2081 0800. Web: www.careforthefamily.org.uk

Bookshelf

Farewell My Child – Stories told and memories cherished, shared experiences of child bereavement.

Edited by Ann Chalmers
ISBN 978-0-9521661-7-7

Gone But Not Lost – The thoughts and feelings parents face soon after the death of a child. Each chapter covers a different element of grieving.

David W Wiersbe, ISBN 0-8010-9716-9

The Worst Loss - How families heal from the death of a child.

Barbara D Rosof, ISBN 080503241X

Living with Bereavement – Practical, emotional and spiritual help for anyone living with bereavement.

Sue Mayfield, 978-0-7459-5295-6

Children and Bereavement

Wendy Duffy, ISBN 071514846X

Someone Has Died Suddenly - Mainly for young bereaved children to help them cope, recover and go on to lead full and happy lives.
Mary Williams OBE, ISBN 978-1-90640-9098