

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

When Your Child Dies

There is no grief more extreme than a parent's grief at the death of a child. A parent's grief can be so intense it may seem exaggerated or abnormal. Bereavement counselors point out that parental grief is vastly different from all other forms of grief, and that it is the most long-lasting grief of all.

Find Your Own Way, Take Your Own Time

Parental grief can be resolved, of course, but it can take longer than other forms of grief, and can involve more work than the death of a spouse, parent or sibling.

It's important for you, and those supporting your bereavement, to understand that the process of parental grief is not like any other—allow yourself to find your own way, and to take your own time.

You Have Lost a Part of Yourself

There are a number of factors known to effect parental grief. With the death of your child you have lost not only that particular child but also the specific hopes, dreams, expectations, fantasies and wishes you had for that child; the loss is enormous.

You have lost:

- A part of yourself
- A part of your partner
- A part of your family
- And a part of your family's future

Guilt

More than any other emotion, guilt commonly characterizes parental grief. Parents tend to have more expectations of themselves in their parental role than in any other. Parental expectations are usually very unrealistic. But when a child dies, the tendency is to think: "I failed."

As a parent, you are expected to be your child's protector, advisor, problem-solver and provider. You fix things for your child. You are expected to control whatever happens to them. So, when your child dies, you tend to believe that you have let everyone down: your child, your partner, your family, everyone.

Then, because you have let everyone down—by failing in your parental duty—you don't feel you deserve sympathy for your loss. Unrealistic parental expectations can make you feel "it was my fault."

Social Response to Parental Bereavement

Another element that makes parental bereavement so difficult is the response of other people to your loss. Society values the parent-child relationship, but society also does little to assist the bereaved parent - we don't even have a name for a parent who has lost a child. We have the name widow for a woman who has lost her husband, and orphan for a child who has lost his or her parents.

The bereaved parent seems to represent the very worst fears of every parent: "If it happened to your child, it could happen to mine."

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There are a number of other factors that will affect your grieving process, these include:

The age of your child. In terms of the intensity of your grief, the age of your deceased child is irrelevant. However, your child's age does influence issues that you will have to deal with later. The age of your deceased child determines the developmental issues that were left unresolved at the time of death.

Validation for your grief. According to many bereaved parents, they are avoided more than other mourners, and they feel ostracized by society. This, combined with feelings of guilt, can make bereaved parents feel like social lepers.

Anger. It is common for parents to feel a strong anger at the death of a child. Their child's death violates the very order of nature and the universe: children are not meant to die before their parents. Death severs the parent-child bond, the most intense bond in the world. Your anger may increase as you notice that people are avoiding you because you make them feel uncomfortable; you remind parents of how vulnerable they are.

Finding Ways to Live After the Death of Your Child

With the death of a child, it may seem as though your whole world has stopped, and that it will be impossible to ever move on. Every day, you live with the heaviest burden a parent can ever carry, but slowly, surely, life will go on and you will go on with it. You will never forget, but you will find a way to integrate the pain with your everyday life so that it becomes tolerable. Take care of yourself, take care of your family and seek help and support when you need it, from whomever you feel most comfortable.