

# Helping Dispel 5 Common Myths About Grief

by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

Our society continues to perpetuate a number of myths about grief and mourning. These myths may seem harmless, but I have found that they can quickly become hurdles to healing.

This article describes five of the most common myths about grief. I hope that this information will help you overcome these myths and better understand how to help yourself or others heal.

## **Myth #1: Grief and mourning are the same experience.**

Most people tend to use the words grief and mourning interchangeably. However, there is an important distinction between them. We have learned that people move toward healing not by just grieving, but through mourning.

Simply stated, *grief* is the internal thoughts and feelings we experience when someone we love dies. *Mourning*, on the other hand, is taking the internal experience of grief and expressing it outside ourselves.

In reality, many people in our culture grieve, but they do not mourn. Instead of being encouraged to express their grief outwardly, they are often greeted with messages such as "carry on," "keep your chin up," and "keep busy." So, they end up grieving within themselves in isolation, instead of mourning outside of themselves in the presence of loving companions.

## **Myth #2: There is a predictable and orderly progression to the experience of grief.**

Stage-like thinking about both dying and grief has been appealing to many people. Somehow the "stages of grief" have helped people make sense out of an experience that isn't as orderly and predictable as we would like it to be. If only it were so simple!

The concept of "stages" was popularized in 1969 with the publication of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' landmark text *On Death and Dying*. Kubler-Ross never intended for people to literally interpret her five "stages of dying." However, many people have done just that, not only with the process of dying, but with the processes of bereavement, grief, and mourning as well.

One such consequence is when people around the grieving person believe that he or she should be in "stage 2" or "stage 4" by now. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Each person's grief is uniquely his or her own. It is neither predictable nor orderly. Nor can its different dimensions be so easily categorized. We only get ourselves in trouble when we try to prescribe what the grief and mourning experiences of others should be or when we try to fit our own grief into neat little boxes.

**Myth #3: It is best to move away from grief and mourning instead of toward it.**

Many grieverers do not give themselves permission or receive permission from others to mourn. We live in a society that often encourages people to prematurely move away from their grief instead of toward it. Many people view grief as something to be overcome rather than experienced. The result is that many of us either grieve in isolation or attempt to run away from our grief.

People who continue to express their grief outwardly-to mourn-are often viewed as "weak," "crazy" or "self-pitying." The common message is "shape up and get on with your life." Refusing to allow tears, suffering in silence, and "being strong," are thought to be admirable behaviors. Many people in grief have internalized society's message that mourning should be done quietly, quickly, and efficiently.

Such messages encourage the repression of the griever's thoughts and feelings. The problem is that attempting to mask or move away from grief results in internal anxiety and confusion. With little, if any, social recognition of the normal pain of grief, people begin to think their thoughts and feelings are abnormal. "I think I'm going crazy," they often tell me.

They're not crazy, just grieving. And in order to heal they must move toward their grief through continued mourning, not away from it through repression and denial.

**Myth #4: Tears expressing grief are only a sign of weakness.**

Unfortunately, many people associate tears of grief with personal inadequacy and weakness. Crying on the part of the mourner often generates feelings of helplessness in friends, family, and caregivers.

Out of a wish to protect mourners from pain, friends and family may try to stop the tears. Comments such as, "Tears won't bring him back" and "He wouldn't want you to cry" discourage the expression of tears.

Yet crying is nature's way of releasing internal tension in the body and allows the mourner to communicate a need to be comforted. Crying makes people feel better, emotionally and physically.

Tears are not a sign of weakness. In fact, crying is an indication of the griever's willingness to do the "work of mourning."

**Myth #5: The goal is to "get over" your grief.**

We have all heard people ask, "Are you over it yet?" To think that we as human beings "get over" grief is ridiculous! We never "get over" our grief but instead become reconciled to it.

We do not resolve or recover from our grief. These terms suggest a total return to "normalcy" and yet in my personal, as well as professional, experience, we are all forever changed by the experience of grief. For the mourner to assume that life will be exactly as it was prior to the death is unrealistic and potentially damaging. Those people who think the goal is to "resolve" grief become destructive to the healing process.

Mourners do, however, learn to reconcile their grief. We learn to integrate the new reality of moving forward in life without the physical presence of the person who has died. With reconciliation a renewed sense of energy and confidence, an ability to fully acknowledge the reality of the death, and the capacity to become re-involved with the activities of living. We also come to acknowledge that pain and grief are difficult-yet necessary-parts of life and living.

As the experience of reconciliation unfolds, we recognize that life will be different without the presence of the person who died. At first we realize this with our head, and later come to realize it with our heart. We also realize that reconciliation is a process, not an event. The sense of loss does not completely disappear yet softens and the intense pangs of grief become less frequent. Hope for a continued life emerges as we are able to make commitments to the future, realizing that the person who died will never be forgotten, yet knowing that one's own life can and will move forward.

#### **About the Author**

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# Helping Children Cope With Grief

*by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.*

## **When Someone Loved Dies**

Adults grieve. So do children. As an adult or child, experiencing grief means to "feel," not just to "understand." Anyone old enough to love is old enough to grieve. Even before children are able to talk, they grieve when someone loved dies. And these feelings about the death become a part of their lives forever.

Caring adults, whether parents, relatives or friends, can help children during this time. If adults are open, honest and loving, experiencing the loss of someone loved can be a chance for children to learn about both the joy and the pain that comes from caring deeply for other people.

## **Talking About Death to Children**

Adults sometimes have trouble facing death themselves. So open, honest discussions about death with children can be difficult. Yet adults who are able to confront, explore and learn from their own personal fears about death can help children when someone loved dies. As a result, children can form " a healthy attitude toward both life and death.

When a death occurs, children need to be surrounded by feelings of warmth, acceptance and understanding. Caring adults can provide this support.

## **A Caring Adult's Role**

How adults respond when someone loved dies has a major effect on the way children react to the death. Sometimes, adults don't want to talk about the death, assuming that by doing so children will be spared some of the pain and sadness.

However, the reality is very simple: children will grieve, anyway.

Adults who are willing to talk openly about the death help children understand that grief is a natural feeling when someone loved had died. Children need adults to confirm that it's all right to be sad and to cry, and that the hurt they feel now won't last forever.

When ignored, children may suffer more from feeling isolated than from the actual death itself. Worse yet, they feel all alone in their grief.

## **Encourage Questions About Death**

When someone loved had died, adults need to be open, honest and loving. Patiently, they need to answer questions about the death in language children can understand.

Adults shouldn't worry about having all the answers. The answers aren't as important as the fact that they're responding to the questions in a way that shows they care.

Children may repeat the same questions about the death again and again. It's natural. Repeating questions and getting answers helps them understand and adjust to the loss of someone loved.

### **Establish a Helping Relationship**

Respond to children with sensitivity and warmth. Be aware of voice tone; maintain eye contact when talking about the death. What is communicated without words can be just as meaningful to children as what is actually said.

Let children know that their feelings will be accepted. Although some of their behavior may seem inappropriate, adults need to understand children during this stressful time, not judge their behavior or criticize.

Children need to know that adults want to understand their point of view. This commitment tells a child, "You're worthwhile; your feelings will be respected."

### **Sharing Religious Beliefs with a Child**

Adults often wonder if they should share with children their religious beliefs regarding death. This is a complex issue; no simple guidelines are available.

Keep in mind that adults can only share with children those concepts they truly believe. Any religious explanations about death must also be described in concrete terms; children have difficulty understanding abstractions. The theological correctness of the information is less important at this time than the fact that the adult is communicating in a loving way.

### **Allow Children to Participate**

Create an atmosphere that tells children that their thoughts, fears and wishes will be recognized when someone loved dies. This recognition includes the right to be part of planning the arrangements for the funeral.

Although children may not completely understand the ceremony surrounding the death, being involved in the planning of the funeral helps establish a sense of comfort and the understanding that life goes on even though someone loved has died.

Since the funeral of someone loved is a significant event, children should have the same opportunity to attend as any other member of the family. That's "allowed" to attend, but not "forced." Explain the purpose of the funeral: as a time to honor the person who has died; as a time to help, comfort and support each other and as a time to affirm that life goes on.

Viewing the body of someone loved who has died can also be a positive experience. It provides an opportunity to say "goodbye" and helps children accept the reality of the death. As with attending the funeral, however, seeing the body should not be forced.

### **Growing Through Grief**

Grief is complex. It will vary from child to child. Caring adults need to communicate to children that this feeling is not one to be ashamed of or something to hide. Instead, grief is a natural expression of love for the person who died.

As a caring adult, the challenge is clear: children do not choose between grieving and not grieving; adults, on the other hand, do have a choice- to help or not to help children cope with grief.

With love and understanding, adults can guide children through this vulnerable time and help make the experience a valuable part of a child's personal growth and development.

### **Suggested Guidelines Concerning Children and Grief**

Be a good observer. See how each child is behaving. Don't rush in with explanations. Usually, it's more helpful to ask exploring questions than to give quick answers.

When someone loved dies, don't expect children's reactions to be obvious and immediate. Be patient and be available.

Children are part of the family, too. And reassurance comes from the presence of loving people. Children feel secure in the care of gentle arms and tenderness.

When describing the death of someone loved to a child, use simple and direct language.

Be honest. Express your own feelings regarding the death. By doing so, children have a model for expressing their own feelings. It's all right to cry, too.

Allow children to express a full range of feelings. Anger, guilt, despair and protest are natural reactions to the death of someone loved.

Listen to children, don't just talk to them.

No one procedure or formula will fit all children, either at the time of death or during the months that follow. Be patient, flexible and adjust to individual needs.

Adults must recognize their own personal feelings about death. Until they consciously explore their own concerns, doubts, and fears about death, it will be difficult to support children when someone loved dies.

### **Related Resources**

- [Healing The Grieving Child's Heart: 100 Practical Ideas For Families, Friends & Caregivers](#) (book)
- [Healing The Bereaved Child: Grief Gardening, Growth Through Grief And Other Touchstones For Caregivers](#) (book)

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# Helping Teenagers Cope With Grief

*by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.*

## **Teenagers Mourn Too**

Each year thousands of teenagers experience the death of someone they love. When a parent, sibling, friend or relative dies, teens feel the overwhelming loss of a someone who helped shape their fragile self-identities. And these feelings about the death become a part of their lives forever.

Caring adults, whether parents, teachers, counselors or friends, can help teens during this time. If adults are open, honest and loving, experiencing the loss of someone loved can be a chance for young people to learn about both the joy and pain that comes from caring deeply for others.

## **Many Teens are Told to "Be Strong"**

Sad to say, many adults who lack understanding of their experience discourage teens from sharing their grief. Bereaved teens give out all kinds of signs that they are struggling with complex feelings, yet are often pressured to act as if they are doing better than they really are.

When a parent dies, many teens are told to "be strong" and "carry on" for the surviving parent. They may not know if they will survive themselves, let alone be able to support someone else. Obviously, these kinds of conflicts hinder the "work of mourning."

## **Teen Years Can be Naturally Difficult**

Teens are no longer children, yet neither are they adults. With the exception of infancy, no developmental period is so filled with change as adolescence. Leaving the security of childhood, the adolescent begins the process of separation from parents. The death of a parent or sibling, then, can be a particularly devastating experience during this already difficult period.

At the same time the bereaved teen is confronted by the death of someone loved, he or she also faces psychological, physiological and academic pressures. While teens may begin to look like "men" or "women," they will still need consistent and compassionate support as they do the "work of mourning," because physical development does not always equal emotional maturity.

## **Teens Often Experience Sudden Deaths**

The grief that teens experience often comes suddenly and unexpectedly. A parent may die of a sudden heart attack, a brother or sister may be killed in an auto accident, or a

friend may commit suicide. The very nature of these deaths often results in a prolonged and heightened sense of unreality.

Feeling dazed or numb when someone loved dies is often part of the grieving teen's early experience. This numbness serves a valuable purpose: it gives their emotions time to catch up with what their mind has been told. This feeling helps insulate them from the reality of the death until they are more able to tolerate what they don't want to believe.

### **Support May Be Lacking**

Many people assume that adolescents have supportive friends and family who will be continually available to them. In reality, this may not be true at all. The lack of available support often relates to the social expectations placed on the teen.

They are usually expected to be "grown up" and support other members of the family, particularly a surviving parent and/or younger brothers and sisters. Many teens have been told, "Now, you will have to take care of your family." When an adolescent feels a responsibility to "care for the family," he or she does not have the opportunity--or the permission--to mourn.

Sometimes we assume that teenagers will find comfort from their peers. But when it comes to death, this may not be true. Many bereaved teens are greeted with indifference by their peers. It seems that unless friends have experienced grief themselves, they project their own feelings of helplessness by ignoring the subject of loss entirely.

As we strive to assist bereaved teens, we should keep in mind that many of them are in environments that do not provide emotional support. They may turn to friends and family only to be told to "get on with life."

### **Relationship Conflicts May Exist**

As teens strive for their independence, relationship conflicts with family members often occur. A normal, though trying way in which teens separate from their parents is by going through a period of devaluation.

If a parent dies while the adolescent is emotionally and physically pushing the parent away, there is often a sense of guilt and "unfinished business." While the need to create distance is normal, we can easily see how this complicates the experience of mourning.

We know that most adolescents experience difficult times with their parents and siblings. The conflicts result from the normal process of forming an identity apart from their family. Death, combined with the turbulence of teen-parent and sibling relationships, can make for a real need to "talk-out" what their relationship was like with the person who died.

## **Signs a Teen May Need Extra Help**

As we have discussed, there are many reasons why healthy grieving can be especially difficult for teenagers. Some grieving teens may even behave in ways that seem inappropriate or frightening. Be on the watch for:

- symptoms of chronic depression, sleeping difficulties, restlessness and low self esteem.
- academic failure or indifference to school-related activities
- deterioration of relationships with family and friends
- risk-taking behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse, fighting, and sexual experimentation
- denying pain while at the same time acting overly strong or mature

To help a teen who is having a particularly hard time with his or loss, explore the full spectrum of helping services in your community. School counselors, church groups and private therapists are appropriate resources for some young people, while others may just need a little more time and attention from caring adults like you. The important thing is that you help the grieving teen find safe and nurturing emotional outlets at this difficult time.

## **A Caring Adult's Role**

How adults respond when someone loved dies has a major effect on the way teens react to the death. Sometimes adults don't want to talk about the death, assuming that by doing so, young people will be spared some of the pain and sadness. However, the reality is very simple: teens grieve anyway.

Teens often need caring adults to confirm that it's all right to be sad and to feel a multitude of emotions when someone they love dies. They also usually need help understanding that the hurt they feel now won't last forever. When ignored, teens may suffer more from feeling isolated than from the actual death itself. Worse yet, they feel all alone in their grief.

## **Be Aware of Support Groups**

Peer support groups are one of the best ways to help bereaved teens heal. In a group, teens can connect with other teens who have experienced a loss. They are allowed and encouraged to tell their stories as much, and as often, as they like. In this setting most will be willing to acknowledge that death has resulted in their life being forever changed. You may be able to help teens find such a group. This practical effort on your part will be appreciated.

## **Understanding the Importance of the Loss**

Remember that the death of someone loved is a shattering experience for an adolescent. As a result of this death, the teen's life is under reconstruction. Consider the significance of the loss and be gentle and compassionate in all of your helping efforts.

Grief is complex. It will vary from teen to teen. Caring adults need to communicate to children that this feeling is not one to be ashamed of or hide. Instead, grief is a natural expression of love for the person who died.

For caring adults, the challenge is clear: teenagers do not choose between grieving and not grieving; adults, on the other hand, do have a choice -- to help or not to help teens cope with grief.

With love and understanding, adults can support teens through this vulnerable time and help make the experience a valuable part of a teen's personal growth and development.

While the guidelines in this article may help, it is important to recognize that helping a grieving teen will not be an easy task. You may have to give more concern, time and love than you ever knew you had. But this effort will be more than worth it.

By "walking with" a teen in grief, you are giving one of life's most precious gifts -- yourself.

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# Helping Yourself Heal When Someone Dies

*by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.*

## **Someone You Love Has Died**

You are now faced with the difficult, but important, need to mourn. Mourning is the open expression of your thoughts and feelings regarding the death and the person who has died. It is an essential part of healing. You are beginning a journey that is often frightening, painful, overwhelming, and sometimes lonely. This article provides practical suggestions to help you move toward healing in your personal grief experience.

## **Realize Your Grief is Unique**

Your grief is unique. No one will grieve in exactly the same way. Your experience will be influenced by a variety of factors: the relationship you had with the person who died; the circumstances surrounding the death; your emotional support system; and your cultural and religious background.

As a result of these factors, you will grieve in your own special way. Don't try to compare your experience with that of other people or to adopt assumptions about just how long your grief should last. Consider taking a "one-day-at-a-time" approach that allows you to grieve at your own pace.

### **Talk About Your Grief**

Express your grief openly. By sharing your grief outside yourself, healing occurs. Ignoring your grief won't make it go away; talking about it often makes you feel better. Allow yourself to speak from your heart, not just your head. Doing so doesn't mean you are losing control, or going "crazy." It is a normal part of your grief journey.

Find caring friends and relatives who will listen without judging. Seek out those persons who will walk with, not in front of, or behind you in your journey through grief. Avoid persons who are critical or who try to steal your grief from you. They may tell you, "keep your chin up," or "carry on," or "be happy." While these comments may be well-intended, you do not have to accept them. You have a right to express your grief; no one has the right to take it away.

### **Expect to Feel a Multitude of Emotions**

Experiencing loss affects your head, heart, and spirit. So you may experience a variety of emotions as part of your grief work. Confusion, disorganization, fear, guilt, relief, or explosive emotions are just a few of the emotions you may feel. Sometimes these emotions will follow each other within a short period of time. Or they may occur simultaneously.

As strange as some of these emotions may seem they are normal and healthy. Allow yourself to learn from these feelings. And don't be surprised if out of nowhere you suddenly experience surges of grief, even at the most unexpected times. These grief attacks can be frightening and leave you feeling overwhelmed. They are, however, a natural response to the death of someone loved. Find someone who understands your feelings and will allow you to talk about them.

### **Allow for Numbness**

Feeling dazed or numb when someone dies is often part of your early grief experience. This numbness serves a valuable purpose: it gives your emotions time to catch up with what your mind has told you. This feeling helps create insulation from the reality of the death until you are more able to tolerate what you don't want to believe.

### **Be Tolerant of Your Physical and Emotional Limits**

Your feelings of loss and sadness will probably leave you fatigued. Your ability to think clearly and make decisions may be impaired. And your low-energy level may naturally slow you down. Respect what your body and mind are telling you. Nurture yourself. Get

daily rest. Eat balanced meals. Lighten your schedule as much as possible. Caring for yourself doesn't mean feeling sorry for yourself it means you are using survival skills.

### **Develop a Support System**

Reaching out to others and accepting support is often difficult, particularly when you hurt so much. But the most compassionate self-action you can do at this difficult time is to find a support system of caring friends and relatives who will provide the understanding you need. Find those people who encourage you to be yourself and acknowledge your feelings -- both happy and sad.

### **Make Use of Ritual**

The funeral ritual does more than acknowledge the death of someone loved. It helps provide you with the support of caring people. Most importantly, the funeral is a way for you to express your grief outside yourself. If you eliminate this ritual, you often set yourself up to repress your feelings, and you cheat everyone who cares of a chance to pay tribute to someone who was, and always will be, loved.

### **Embrace Your Spirituality**

If faith is part of your life, express it in ways that seem appropriate to you. Allow yourself to be around people who understand and support your religious beliefs. If you are angry at God because of the death of someone you loved, realize this feeling as a normal part of your grief work. Find someone to talk with who won't be critical of your feelings of hurt and abandonment.

### **Allow a Search for Meaning**

You may find yourself asking, "Why did he die? Why this way? Why now?" This search for meaning is often another normal part of the healing process. Some questions have answers. Some do not. Actually, the healing occurs in the opportunity to pose the questions, not necessarily in answering them. Find a supportive friend who will listen responsively as you search for meaning.

### **Treasure Your Memories**

Memories are one of the best legacies that exist after someone loved dies. Treasure them. Share them with your family and friends. Recognize that your memories may make you laugh or cry. In either case, they are a lasting part of the relationship that you had with a very special person in your life.

### **Move Toward Your Grief and Heal**

The capacity to love requires the necessity to grieve when someone loved dies. You cannot heal unless you openly express your grief. Denying your grief will only make it become more confusing and overwhelming. Embrace your grief and heal.

Reconciling your grief will not happen quickly. Remember, grief is a process, not an event. be patient and tolerant with yourself. Never forget that the death of someone loved changes your life forever. It's not that you won't be happy again. It's simply that you will never be exactly the same as you were before the death.

The experience of grief is powerful. So, too, is your ability to help yourself heal. In doing the work of grieving, you are moving toward a renewed sense of meaning and purpose in your life.

### **Related Resources**

- [Healing Your Grieving Heart](#) (book)

# Helping Yourself Heal When Your Child Dies

*by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.*

## **Allow Yourself to Mourn**

Your child has died. You are now faced with the difficult, but important, need to mourn. Mourning is the open expression of your thoughts and feelings regarding the death of your child. It is an essential part of healing.

With the death of your child, your hopes, dreams and plans for the future are turned upside down. You are beginning a journey that is often frightening, painful, and overwhelming. The death of a child results in the most profound bereavement. In fact, sometimes your feelings of grief may be so intense that you do not understand what is happening. This article provides practical suggestions to help you move toward healing in your personal grief experience.

## **Realize Your Grief is Unique**

Your grief is unique. No one will grieve in exactly the same way. Your experience will be influenced by a variety of factors: the relationship you had with the person who died; the circumstances surrounding the death; your emotional support system; and your cultural and religious background.

As a result of these factors, you will grieve in your own special way. Don't try to compare your experience with that of other people or to adopt assumptions about just how long your grief should last. Consider taking a "one-day-at-a-time" approach that allows you to grieve at your own pace.

## **Allow Yourself to Feel Numb**

Feeling dazed or numb when your child dies may well be a part of your early grief experience. You may feel as if the world has suddenly come to a halt. This numbness serves a valuable purpose: it gives your emotions time to catch up with what your mind has told you.

You may feel you are in a dream-like state and that you will wake up and none of this will be true. These feelings of numbness and disbelief help insulate you from the reality of the death until you are more able to tolerate what you don't want to believe.

## **This Death is "Out of Order"**

Because the more natural order is for parents to precede their children in death, you must readapt to a new and seemingly illogical reality. This shocking reality says that

even though you are older and have been the protector and provider, you have survived while your child has not. This can be so difficult to comprehend.

Not only has the death of your child violated nature's way, where the young grow up and replace the old, but your personal identity was tied to your child. You may feel impotent and wonder why you couldn't have protected your child from death.

### **Expect to Feel a Multitude of Emotions**

The death of your child can result in a variety of emotions. Confusion, disorganization, fear, guilt, anger and relief are just a few of the emotions you may feel. Sometimes these emotions will follow each other within a short period of time. Or they may occur simultaneously.

As strange as some of these emotions may seem, they are normal and healthy. Allow yourself to learn from these feelings. And don't be surprised if out of nowhere you suddenly experience surges of grief, even at the most unexpected times. These grief attacks can be frightening and leave you feeling overwhelmed. They are, however, a natural response to the death of your child. Find someone who understands your feelings and will allow you to talk about them.

### **Be Tolerant of Your Physical and Emotional Limits**

Your feelings of loss and sadness will probably leave you fatigued. Your ability to think clearly and make decisions may be impaired. And your low-energy level may naturally slow you down.

Respect what your body and mind are telling you. Nurture yourself. Get daily rest. Eat balanced meals. Lighten your schedule as much as possible. Caring for yourself doesn't mean feeling sorry for yourself it means you are using survival skills.

### **Talk About Your Grief**

Express your grief openly. When you share your grief outside yourself, healing occurs. Ignoring your grief won't make it go away; talking about it often makes you feel better. Allow yourself to speak from your heart, not just your head. Doing so doesn't mean you are losing control or going "crazy." It is a normal part of your grief journey.

### **Watch Out for Cliches**

Cliches--trite comments some people make in attempts to diminish your loss--can be extremely painful for you to hear. Comments like, "You are holding up so well," "Time heals all wounds," "Think of what you have to be thankful for" or "You have to be strong for others" are not constructive. While these comments may be well-intended, you do not have to accept them. You have every right to express your grief. No one has the right to take it away.

## **Develop a Support System**

Reaching out to others and accepting support is often difficult, particularly when you hurt so much. But the most compassionate self-action you can do at this difficult time is to find a support system of caring friends and relatives who will provide the understanding you need. Seek out those people who encourage you to be yourself and acknowledge your feelings -- both happy and sad.

A support group may be one of the best ways to help yourself. In a group, you can connect with other parents who have experienced the death of a child. You will be allowed and gently encouraged to talk about your child as much, and as often, as you like.

Sharing the pain won't make it disappear, but it can ease any thoughts that what you are experiencing is crazy, or somehow bad. Support comes in different forms for different people -- support groups, counseling, friends, faith -- find out what combination works best for you and try to make use of them.

## **Embrace Your Treasure of Memories**

Memories are one of the best legacies that exist after the death of a child. You will always remember. Instead of ignoring these memories, share them with your family and friends.

Keep in mind that memories can be tinged with both happiness and sadness. If your memories bring laughter, smile. If your memories bring sadness, then it's all right to cry. Memories that were made in love -- no one can take them away from you.

## **Gather Important Keepsakes**

You may want to collect some important keepsakes that help you treasure your memories. You may want to create a memory book, which is a collection of photos that represent your child's life. Some people create memory boxes to keep special keepsakes in. Then, whenever you want, you can open your memory box and embrace those special memories. The reality that your child has died does not diminish your need to have these objects. They are a tangible, lasting part of the special relationship you had with your child.

## **Embrace Your Spirituality**

If faith is part of your life, express it in ways that seem appropriate to you. Allow yourself to be around people who understand and support your religious beliefs. If you are angry at God because of the death of your child, realize this feeling as a normal part of your grief work. Find someone to talk with who won't be critical of whatever thoughts and feelings you need to explore.

You may hear someone say, "With faith, you don't need to grieve." Don't believe it. Having your personal faith does not insulate you from needing to talk out and explore your thoughts and feelings. To deny your grief is to invite problems to build up inside you. Express your faith, but express your grief as well.

### **Move toward Your Grief and Heal**

To restore your capacity to love you must grieve when your child dies. You can't heal unless you openly express your grief. Denying your grief will only make it become more confusing and overwhelming. Embrace your grief and heal.

Reconciling your grief will not happen quickly. Remember, grief is a process, not an event. Be patient and tolerant with yourself. Never forget that the death of your child changes your life forever. It's not that you won't be happy again, it's simply that you will never be exactly the same as you were before the child died.

The experience of grief is powerful. So, too, is your ability to help yourself heal. In doing the work of grieving, you are moving toward a renewed sense of meaning and purpose in your life.



