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When Parents Grieve

Katy just lost her two year-old boy to leukemia. Ted and Sarah's son was stillborn last Thursday. Allen and his wife, Sue, got a phone call from the hospital last March. Their 16 year-old daughter Jill was in critical condition. She didn't survive the car accident. The funeral was three days later. Sam, a twenty-two-year-old college student committed suicide yesterday. His parents and family are devastated. It's not supposed to be like this! Children should outlive their parents. Why does this happen? Young people of all ages die every day. Their lives are cut short by illnesses, disease, tragic accidents, murder, and suicide. The surviving parents are left with a sick, sinking, feeling, the overwhelming loss of their child, who never lived long enough to become a parent. They never lived to comfort their own aging parents. Some parents outlive their adult children. They may have had them around longer, but the loss is still devastating, too painful to bear. Death is hard to deal with at any age, but the loss of children is particularly painful. What do you do if you are one of these parents who just lost a child? How do you go on? What do you say to a mother and father who just lost their child? How do you help parents who grieve?

Grief

About 350 parents a day endure the death of a child in America. They grieve deeply and for a very long time. Parental grief is profound and complicated by nature (Klein, 1998). Parental grief is lifelong. Their sadness lasts their whole lives. The non-bereaved world does not understand. They don't know that life for the bereaved parent will never be the same. The death of a child is probably the most difficult loss. The grief is intense and



prolonged. Parental grief differs from other losses in many ways. We don't expect to outlive our children. It isn't natural. Children are not supposed to die. Since our child is so much a part of us, biologically and emotionally, a part of us dies with our child. Parents feel the future slip away with their lost child. Parents of children who committed suicide experience aggravated emotional deterioration. They feel that they or others could have prevented the child's death. They feel angry at the child, God, and the world. Bereaved couples are so overwhelmed by their own loss that they feel unable to support one another. Their roles as parents and nurturers are lost (Paul, AARP 1995-2002). Future grandchildren are lost. Grieving parents may lose their faith too. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Each person expresses their grief in their own way. Grief doesn't always follow the same pattern. Different feelings come and go at any time. Most people eventually move through the following stages in their grief.

Shock - The initial shock involves physical symptoms like numbness, knots in the stomach, or appetite loss. Thoughts like "This can't be true or this isn't real," reflect overall shock and disbelief.

Guilt - Feeling that you have failed the lost person in some way, or even for surviving them. You may even blame yourself or someone else.

Anger - Anger and rage over the loss can come in many ways.

Depression - This involves hopelessness and feeling overwhelmed. Great sadness and loneliness usually accompany this stage of grief. Bereaved parents sometimes have suicidal thoughts. Fear and uncertainty over the future may occur. It is usually very hard to share these feelings with others. Physical pain, ailments,

insomnia, eating and digestive difficulties may surface.

Acceptance - People vary considerably in how they grieve but peace eventually comes. The heartache and pain may surface from time to time, but the bereaved reaches a point of acceptance. They begin to remember their loved one with joy and integrate the loss into their lives.

Healing

How do you go from gut-wrenching, devastating loss to acceptance? You go slowly, at your own pace. Living with the loss of a child is extremely difficult. You grieve. You hurt. Be open to grief and your feelings. Don't try to be "tough." Unresolved grief can cause serious physical and psychological problems. Journal. It may be helpful to write a letter to your dead child, expressing all the things you were not able to say before the death. Spend time alone with your thoughts. Take time to cry. Let the tears come. Crying is healthy and therapeutic. Floods and rivers of tears will fall unpredictably and unexpectedly. Grief ebbs and flows. Life is full of sorrow from birth to death. We have tears of joy and tears of pain. God knows about your pain, tears, and sadness, He grieves too. "I have heard your prayers, behold I have seen your tears, I will heal you." (II Kings 20:5) "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning." (Psalm 30:5)

You won't just "snap out of it." There is a gaping hole in your heart! Grief affects everything, it turns your life upside down. Your life is shaken to the core. You need time to heal. Relationships may become strained. You may experience more problems in your marriage. Family dynamics change. Your whole family grieves. Expect depression and possibly some acting out in your children. Talk about the death to each other as a family, share your grief. Talk about the good times you remember as well as the bad ones. All family members will be grieving in their own manner.

You may be mad at God. Let Him know how you feel. Talk to God. Express all your thoughts and feelings to Him. Let God know how devastated, angry, sad, and disappointed you are. He can handle it. God wants you to talk to Him. He understands. He watched His own Son Jesus die on a cross. God knows your pain. He will walk with you through this. You may not want anyone around for a while after losing a child, that's understandable. You need to let your friends comfort you eventually.

Tell them about your loss. Close friends can help you bear your burden. Let your friends help. Don't be afraid to tell them your needs and what will help you. Read about grief. Consider joining a support group with people experiencing similar situations. You may gain some understanding of your reactions and learn ways to cope this way. Take care of yourself. Eat a healthy diet, exercise and rest. Seek professional counseling when necessary.

Helping

It hurts to see your friend grieve. You want to do something to alleviate their pain, but you feel so helpless. You can't fix their broken heart. But you can be supportive, let them know you care, that you are there for them. One of the best things you can do is listen. Your presence and listening ear helps tremendously. Bereaved parents benefit from having support. They need a non-judgmental friend, available any hour of the day to listen and provide a shoulder to cry on. They need people to walk along side them, to share in their sorrow. Check on them frequently. Offer to do specific things for them like taking their kids to activities or doing their grocery shopping. Bring them dinner. Do things for them that will alleviate the demands of every day life. Don't be afraid to bring up the subject of their loss. Be sensitive, not blunt. Don't tell them how to feel. Let them know that their tragedy breaks your heart too. Say what you feel. "I'm sorry, I am shocked and crushed." "I want to help." Imagine the pain of losing one of your children. The sheer thought brings sadness and heartache. Their loss is deep. Don't try to cheer them up. Don't convey the message that "they should be getting over this by now." Do not be so quick to explain their loss theologically or tell them that their child is in a better place.



They know this and still grieve deeply. Respect their need to be alone too. Give them some space. Talk with them more as time goes on. There is no right or wrong way to help others grieve. The important thing is to be there. They will need to talk about their feelings as they move through different stages of grief. Listen to them. They need you to be there for them. Let them go through the grieving process at their own pace. Be patient. Cry with them. Pray with them and for them. Love them through this.

Comfort

Comfort like Christ. Our loving God, Jesus goes all the way with us. He wants us to walk with our friends in their grief. Jesus would say, "I hurt with you." "I love you." "I will go with you." We are to emulate Christ in comforting the bereaved. Remember what Jesus did when He saw people mourning Lazarus. Jesus wept (John 11:35). Christ sends us to help bear their grief. He wants us to stay close by, listen, talk, even cry with them. You may have been placed in your friend's life to provide comfort. You may have already been comforted by God and others in a previous loss, so you can comfort your friend now. "We can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God." (II Cor. 1: 3-4).

Being There

Nothing helps the bereaved parent more than your presence. It sounds simple but it's true. Your compassion, love, warmth, and Christ-likeness, cover a broken-hearted grieving friend. Stay with them. Check on them. Call

them. Make space within yourself to let in their pain. Real fellowship in the body of Christ means entering in and sharing the pain of others (Warren, 2002). We enter into the fellowship of suffering. We need to be there for each other the most during times of crisis, grief and doubt. Being there means just that. Bereaved parents often feel crushed by their situation. There faith waivers. They need believing friends to help bear their burden. You comfort them when you let yourself feel their pain. Encourage the person to experience whatever feelings come. Let them tell their story. Let them express their sadness and anger. That's what being there means. It goes beyond comfort. It becomes part of their healing process. It is not always easy being there. It stirs up our own fears and anxieties and issues about death, especially losing a child or other family members. You may still be grieving a loss yourself. You can still help. You can connect with your friend in their loss. A grieving heart is sincerely, deeply broken. God promises that that heart, that grieving parent will be comforted and blessed by Him. Jesus said so, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." (Matt. 5:4). God is here for us in our grief. He comforts and heals us.

F.Y.I.

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