



## **When a Child Dies**

**F**our-month-old Brittany awakened as usual for her 2 AM feeding. She contentedly nursed at the breast and went peacefully back to sleep. At 7 AM her father found her cool, blue and unresponsive. An autopsy confirmed the preliminary diagnosis of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome.



*Shortness of breath, spiked temperatures, and mucus that could not be coughed up: At age 3 Shawana was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis. For the next six years she and her single mother rode a roller coaster, going from one health crisis to the next. Shawana died at age 9 when her body could no longer overcome the effects of the mucus clogging her lungs.*



*Nine-year-old Joshua and his four-year-old brother explored the spacious yard while the adults visited and prepared dinner. Suddenly Joshua burst through the door screaming, "I told him not to go in there!" Nathan was pulled limp from the neighbor's backyard pool. Efforts to revive him failed.*



**R**egardless of how it occurs, the death of a child is devastating. The loss leaves loved ones feeling dazed and helpless. For a boy or girl to die and have their whole future cut off—it doesn't seem fair. The death of a child seems to defy the laws of nature. Shouldn't children outlive their parents?

Besides the emotional agony, there are those nagging questions we can never satisfactorily answer: "Why did my sweet, beautiful daughter

have to die with cancer? Why!" "If I had only been more careful, maybe . . . ?" "Why in God's name would a 15-year-old boy kill himself?"

### **ACCEPT YOUR FEELINGS**

If your son or daughter has died, your experience of grief will be unique to you. Know that whatever you are feeling, it's OK. Shock, numbness, disbelief, anger, guilt, fear, unbearable



sadness—whatever your emotions and thoughts, they are part of the difficult and healing journey through grief. Stay open to your feelings as they arise. Realize that your anguish and confusion are the beginning of a natural healing process—a process you cannot rush, a process that will have a variety of ups and downs.

You are in a major crisis. But you *will* get through it. With time, and with help from family and friends, and with a combination of struggle and surrender, you will see daylight again. You will learn and heal and grow. In your heart there will always be an ache and special love for your child, but your incredible pain will gradually soften. You *will* get better.

### **SIDESTEP NEGATIVE THOUGHTS**

While it's essential that you let yourself experience your feelings, it's also important that you do not mentally beat yourself up. Stay attuned to your body and the emotions that come from within, but do not keep banging yourself over the head with self-defeating thoughts. For example, when a child dies a father may be overwhelmed with unhelpful, emotionally draining thoughts of guilt, or a mother may find herself mentally replaying again and again the scene of her child's death.

When unhealthy picture or word thoughts start to crowd in, mentally say "Stop!" while visualizing a large stop sign. Then immediately put your mind on more positive, constructive thoughts. Doing something physical, like taking a walk or talking to another person, can also help you to break loose from self-defeating thoughts.



### **ATTEND TO NEEDS OF OTHER CHILDREN**

It's a tall order when you are in so much personal pain, but if you have other children, you must

attend to their personal and emotional needs. They are depending upon you. In age-appropriate language, tell them what has happened. They can handle it.

Do let your children know how you are feeling; allow them to see your tears. In ways that do not frighten them, they need to learn about grief firsthand from you. Do your best to answer their spoken and unspoken questions. Hold them, reassure them, express your love.

You will have limited time and energy to spend with your children. While your spouse or the child's grandparents may be able to offer some help, remember that they too are deep in mourning. Perhaps another family member or close friend can assist with the children, particularly during the immediate post-death crisis.

### **YOUR SPOUSE IS GRIEVING TOO**

During times of crisis, most married couples naturally turn to one another for emotional support and practical assistance. But remember, just as the death has thrown you into your own unique pattern of grief, so too with your husband or wife. For example, feeling utterly depressed, you may want warmth and understanding from your spouse who can't give it because he or she is still numb with shock.

Do your best to comfort and assist one another, but extend lots of extra understanding and patience. You each will require time alone as well as time to talk individually with others. Honor the fact that each of you must grieve in your own way according to your own timetable.

### **SAYING GOOD-BYE WITH A MEMENTO**

Parents often find comfort and meaning in leaving a token gift—perhaps a personal note, symbol, or toy—with the body of their deceased child. Recalling the drowning of her 24-year-old son, a mother shared, "In his casket I included his Boy Scout Order of the Arrow sash, his scuba diver's flag, and a rabbit skin that he had tanned himself."

Elizabeth Brown, who wrote *SunRise Tomorrow: Coping with a Child's Death* after her daughter LeeAnne died, recommends involving brothers and sisters. "Let them choose a special article to leave with their sibling—a doll, a stuffed animal, or a book. We took LeeAnne's Cabbage Patch doll with the big red pigtails and a Tenderheart Care Bear to snuggle with her. A friend brought an angel, which we had placed on top of the casket."

### GUIDELINES FOR HEALING

- **Breathe!** In the stress of grieving, we often fail to breathe deeply, smoothly and freely. You can promote healing and well-being by occasionally taking a slow, deep breath, allowing your belly to expand . . . and then feeling your breath as it gently, naturally flows out. As you go through the day, notice your breathing. Avoid tensing the muscles of your belly. Breathe with a soft belly.
- **Take care of yourself.** Rest as needed, eat nutritiously, and take in adequate water and other fluids. Walk in the fresh air or engage in another form of exercise that you find pleasant. If you respect your body and its enormous wisdom, your journey toward healing will be much smoother.
- **Express and share your grief.** Give yourself permission to experience whatever the grieving process brings to you. Allow yourself to hurt and sob, and also allow yourself to feel relief, peace and hope. In addition, find at least one person whom you like and trust, and during your journey of grief occasionally pour out your heart to this individual. Keep in mind that loving touch and shared laughter are part of healthy, healing friendship. Remember also that you have sustained a major loss; let the healing proceed naturally, at its own pace. Be very gentle and accepting with yourself.
- **Ask for what you need.** If you need help with the children, more fun times with your spouse, a period of solitude or a week off work, speak up and ask the appropriate person for what you want. Whether the answer you receive is yes or no, graciously accept it. Sometimes you may need to take charge and give yourself what you need.
- **Forgive and let go.** Life is a school in which we learn by making mistakes. To forgive is an act of love. We all require forgiveness, and we all crave love. Forgive yourself for what you did or didn't do. Extend the same kindness to your spouse and others. And forgive the world for the way it is. As necessary, forgive repeatedly, so that you can let go and make fresh starts.
- **Nurture your marriage.** The death of a child is like a major emotional earthquake. You will feel aftershocks for a long time. Common marital aftershocks include irritability between spouses, issues of blame and resentment, lack of communication, loss of sexual intimacy, and frustration with wives "grieving too long" and husbands "not sharing their grief." Of course, you can avoid or at least minimize these types of problems. In fact, some relationships grow closer and stronger during the season of grief. For this to happen, you must communicate regularly and be genuinely willing to learn from one another, and you must offer to each other hope and an abundance of patience and understanding.
- **If you are spiritually inclined, draw on this resource.** Your relationship to God or a guiding power can bring immeasurable comfort in times of crisis. Nourish yourself spiritually in whatever way works best for you—prayer, song, worship, meditation, or the drinking in of sacred scripture. Ask questions. Then trustfully and patiently open to the inner guidance you receive. Listen to the whispers of your heart and soul.

- **Explore sources of outside help.** Hospice bereavement counselors, clergy, mental health professionals, family therapists—these and other resources are available when you need them. Various national organizations also reach out to those grieving the death of a child: The Compassionate Friends (708-990-0010), the National SIDS Foundation (800-221-7437), and SHARE (314-947-6164), a self-help group devoted to helping parents who have had a miscarriage, stillbirth, ectopic pregnancy, or an early infant death.
- **Give of yourself to others.** In giving to others we give to ourselves and thus promote our own healing and well-being. A bereaved mother expressed it this way: “For me, going back to work was the best possible therapy. I worked at a rehabilitation hospital with patients who were brain damaged and with those recovering from strokes and spinal cord injuries. Attending to their needs kept me from dwelling too much on my personal problems. Any time I looked at their long-term problems, I considered myself fortunate.”
- **Offer a gesture of special remembrance.** Treasure the fond memories of your beloved child. Save a few keepsakes as tangible reminders of the relationship you shared. In addition, consider making a gesture of special remembrance—perhaps a donation of a book or money to a local library, or a basket of food for a

family in need. A bereaved father shared this story: “Early in the spring four years ago our son, Caleb, died of cancer. In memory of him we planted a dogwood tree in the neighborhood park. Now every time I see that tree I think of Caleb, especially in the springtime when it’s full of beautiful pink blossoms.”

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