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Registered Charity No: 1081572

A Parents Guide To Grief

Being a Parent

When we first become parents, our lives change. We experience powerful feelings of protection, and want always to be able to say, “I’m here, you’re safe”.

When our children are young, they become our highest priority, and we accept new and wide responsibilities. We give up sleep, energy, privacy and time, putting our child's needs ahead of our own as we adapt to their time frame. We become nurse, teacher and referee along with many other things too.

Becoming a parent changes us and, through the changes, we find strengths and skills in ourselves, of which we were perhaps unaware. We develop patience, empathy and accord with another human being who, at least initially, is totally vulnerable.

Being a parent can expand our sense of who we are or what we might become. There can be new issues, new questions in our lives, presented by our role as a parent. In one way we might be stronger and more confident, but we can also feel more vulnerable.

A Parent’s Grief

When a child dies, regardless of age we lose part of ourselves, not only because they are our child, but because of the way they have become entwined with our own identity. We may experience an overwhelming

sense of failure: we thought that we could always protect them, unfortunately we were wrong. Whatever age our child is when they die, we still feel the unfairness of their death. The natural order of things is parents die before their children: anything else is against nature, an accident, a catastrophe.

Feeling Loss

Most of us in the early days of our bereavement, feel the loss of our child as an intensely physical pain. As time goes by, we often see the anniversary of the day they were born to be a very lonely and difficult time, because our memories of it are unique to us. We may find ourselves reliving those hours each year. That is something even the closest members of our family may not be able to share, or even comprehend.

The anniversary of the day they died can be yet another milestone or hurdle to face, and many bereaved parents may feel the need to plan how they will deal with these anniversaries to help them through these days. These plans could include visiting the cemetery or crematorium with flowers, having your loved ones name written in a book of remembrance, placing a tribute in the local press, releasing sky lanterns as well as visiting a religious building for a period of silent reflection. Parents may also feel they want to set up a permanent memorial, such as a memorial fund or bursary. All these suggestions can be used to great effect.

Caring and Losing

As parents, our care for our young children has been intensely physical as well as emotional: we have fed them, bathed them, changed and dressed them, cuddled them and held them in our arms. Even when our children are older, the memories of physical care are part of the bond between us. When we suffer from a traumatic event that a sudden death brings, the circumstances in which they died will affect how we feel. We may be struggling to understand the circumstances that led to their death.

In addition we might not have had the opportunity to say goodbye or our last words with them may have been harsh. Each death brings its own

We each have to find our own way through our grief. Just as each child is special and different, so is each mother and father. Our pain when our child dies is unique to us, but we do NOT have to walk the path alone.

If you would like any further information about the contents of this booklet please don't hesitate to contact us;

If you feel you are alone, ring our helpline

0345 123 55 42 9am to 9pm 365 days.

All calls to SCARD are only charged at local rate no matter where in the UK you live.

Contact us:

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partner, our family, for friends and indeed ourselves. If we are in the horrific position of being the only survivor, then perhaps we need to survive in order to bear witness to the fact that our child did live, that he or she was special, precious, loved. Parents do survive, and many things can help.

Most importantly we need to recognise that the loss of our child is not something we are expected to bear alone: we need to let other people help us. sometimes we are so locked into our parenthood role that we find this very difficult. We fear that if we let ourselves go, weep with a friend, or even acknowledge to our children how much we hurt, somehow we will lose the ability to cope at all.

But in truth it is not like that. In the early days of our bereavement, if we give ourselves space, let other people cook the meals, take our children to school, listen to us as we talk about our dead child, then we will gradually grow stronger and better able to carry on.

Our children will benefit from the company of others, whether that is playing a game with friends or talking with someone they trust about what has happened.

Our partner needs space and time also: he/she may choose to spend time alone, perhaps pursuing leisure activities, or he/she may enjoy going to the pub, or he/she may spend long hours at work hoping to escape from the grief at home.

It is hard to recognise each individual's needs at this time, especially when these are very different. One of us may need professional advice while the other may not. Usually it helps to seek support from several sources.

We may feel compelled to contact bereavement supporting charities such as SCARD or CADD, making use of their helpline, leaflets and website or even setting up a memorial fund in memory of our son or daughter. We can derive great consolation and comfort in sharing our loss with other bereaved people, telling our child's story and finding that we are not alone in our pain.

particular burdens and we may need to seek further help to deal with these feelings.

If our child was an adult when they died, they may not have lived near us, they may have married or had a partner, so that we are no longer next of kin. Although we may not see it at the time, the necessary procedures that follow death of our son or daughter in preparing for their funeral could be looked on as our continuation of caring.

When planning their funeral we may feel the need to include siblings, stepchildren, grandparents and other close relatives as well as friends of your child in the planning and who may want to help and support us with this.

Our Surviving Children

If we have other children, they will continue to need our care, and in fact, if they are very young, their on-going requirements can present us with the need for structure in our daily routine and that could be helpful to everyone in the household.

Our surviving children may need our care and support now more than ever, for they will be confused and hurt. Their lives too have been changed. Many children look back at the time immediately after the death of their brother or sister and say they felt as if they had lost their mother and father too, as though their whole family had disintegrated. We may know this is happening, yet be unable to prevent it. We can be so disabled by our grief that we find it difficult to be a parent to our other children.

Some of us will try to protect our other children from the full extent of our grief, because it seems a burden too big for them to shoulder and this can leave them feeling even more alone: if we do not share our tears with them, they feel shut out. It is better to weep together than be separated by closed doors.

As parents, our feelings of failure and guilt over the death of our child may give us an urge to overprotect our surviving children. We may even

find it difficult to allow them to lead a normal life, to let them out of our sight. This is true especially if the death of our child was sudden and un-expected: we fear the same thing may happen again.

Others in the Family

We may be trying to support other members of our family at this time. Our own parents have lost a grandchild and will be grieving: as they see their daughter/son suffering, this can seem like a double burden. We might feel that they need protecting from seeing the depths of our grief: but in fact most of us are helped by sharing rather than by pretending. Like our own children, we may feel we have lost our own parent, that they are unavailable to us because of their grief.

We might want to shout “*who is parenting me?*” we are fortunate indeed if there are people within our family able to answer our cry for help.

Coping Alone

If we are a single parent there are other burdens to shoulder. Not only do we have to be mother and father to our surviving children, but we have no one to be there for us in our worst times. As well as feeling desperately alone, we may find that this loss reminds us of other bereavement that we faced in the past. In this situation, we urgently need support of other adults, whether family, friends or professionals, so that we in turn will be able to help both ourselves and our surviving children. If we are now childless, the isolation can feel unbearable, and may lead us to question our identity as a parent.

Difficulties in Grieving Together

We may be shocked to find that we experience difficulties in our marriage or partnership. Even when we have been close, the pain of grief can drive a wedge between us. We think we should be able to share our loss, to support each other, but often it is not like that.

We may grieve in different ways, one needing words while the other

needs silence, or perhaps action. We may find our partners tears unbearable painful and may hurt so much that we are unable to hold their pain as well as our own.

A mother may be used to being the person who makes things better, the one who sorts things out. Fathers may feel they failed in their perceived role as provider and protector. We may each try to sort out the others problems, rather than cling together and let ourselves grieve.

If our relationship was difficult before, it may get worse rather than better, at least in the short term. It may improve in the long term through our shared suffering, and growing understanding of each others grief.

Children born after the Death of their Brother or Sister

Some parents may give birth to further children after their child has died. We may be surprised by how our feelings are interwoven, how the past death is also part of the new birth. Some mothers experience vivid flash-backs during pregnancy or labour.

Although we are looking forward to the birth of our new baby, we may find ourselves suffering extremes of anxiety and fear, our confidence is gone and we are full of doubt and worry.

This can make the early weeks and months fraught and may make bonding with the new baby very difficult. We know that we will be kept busy when our new baby arrives, and the tiredness from this will add to the weariness that the earlier bereavement has brought, but in some way the need for a new routine can help us and give a new structure to our days.

Sometimes friends can be extraordinarily insensitive in thinking, and even saying, that the new baby will somehow wipe out the earlier loss, that everything will be all right when we have a replacement. It is hard to have to explain that the new baby can *never* replace the child who has died. We welcome the new child as a blessing and a joy but welcome them for themselves not as a substitute.