

Grieving the Death of a Child

The death of a child is the most difficult experience any parent can face.

With medical advances and technology such as ultrasound, you can establish a very early relationship with your unborn child. A miscarriage or stillbirth deprives you of the opportunity to meet and raise the baby you feel you already know.

Our expectation of having a healthy child and raising that child to adulthood has risen dramatically in recent years. This brings its own difficulties when it comes to grief. While the absence of the child is your primary loss, the loss of the dreams and hopes you held for them may add to your grief.

As time moves on, you will be reminded of your loss as the children of your friends and neighbours reach milestones such as their first day at school, First Communion, 18th birthdays, Leaving Certificate results.

Simple social questions such as “How many children do you have?” can be very difficult and you may agonise over how to answer these questions.

If your only child has died you may feel the loss of identity as ‘parent’ and the connection to other parents and child-related activities.

What to expect

You may experience a range of emotions as you grieve, including anger, depression, irritability, sadness, disbelief, loneliness and guilt. Because grief is also a very physical experience, you may feel exhausted at times, with lower concentration and attention span.

You may experience changes in your eating and sleeping patterns. It is not unusual to have vivid dreams about the child or a belief that they have communicated with you, but you may find this unsettling.

The death of a child can place great stress on the family system. Each family member must grieve and adjust to the death in their own way. Siblings may also feel left out or angry at the child who died. Families who can accept the differences between each member’s grief and how they express it tend to cope better with their loss.

Caring for your other children may feel overwhelming when you are consumed by grief. If you have lost your only child, you may look at other families and feel keenly the lack of other children. Each family’s particular circumstances bring their own losses. The death of a child can affect your sexual relationship with your partner. For some people, intimacy and sex can be a way of connecting to their partner, but for others it can bring unwanted reminders of the child’s conception. It may raise issues about having another child when you may not be ready to think about that.

You may feel a need to tell and retell the story of your child's life and death. While this can be painful, it can help you keep a connection to your child. You may find that you distance yourself from people who cannot understand your pain.

How to support bereaved parents

Acknowledge the death. A short, hand-written note or a simple 'I am so sorry' can mean a lot.

Be willing to listen as they talk about their child. They are trying to find meaning in what has happened, and may need to tell the story many times.

Remember siblings need support too. They are also grieving and may welcome the chance to talk to someone other than their parents.

Acknowledge birthdays and anniversaries. Just a note or phone call to say you are thinking about them can be much appreciated.

Respect the family's grief. Don't assume you know what they need. If you want to offer support, ask them how you can help.