

## When a Child Dies

No matter the age or the circumstances, the death of a child, for their parent and family, is beyond description. There are no words to describe the feelings.

The hurt is so deep, the dreams so shattered that recognition of what could or was ahead is beyond our shallow dictionary of words. The unrelenting ache of emptiness overwhelms. Breathing takes every ounce of energy that once was ample for all kinds of activities. Connecting thoughts and the ability to think and to make clear plans for activities and actions, evaporate. There are no exceptions. There is no ways to avoid the repercussion of loss. Only a way to understand it and to allow God's healing love and the courage to trust that all will be well which creates a pathway to contentment. Contentment is an elusive place which seems impossible to reach and yet – it does exist.

### Leaf curl.

Statistics on families who have experienced the death of a child under the age of three years are: seventy-five percent of the marriages will end in divorce. A staggering piece of data. It is with knowledge and determination that marriages are able to stay together. Death of an older child or adult child, carry heavy tolls on marriages as well.

When one person in a relationship is ill or in need of emotional support, the other members of the "tribe" come along side to care for and to comfort the one who is in pain, no matter if the pain is emotional or physical. But when both parents are in emotional pain such as the death of a child, the ability to support and encourage one another is in many cases so depleted that the individuals feel that they are curling in upon themselves without any compassion or support from the one who should be helpful in the crisis. Think of it as leaf curl. Individual isolation and inward woundedness so severe that the separation in the relationship becomes so vast that the relationship fails. Even with grandparents, friends close to the child – all unable, not by will or choosing to ignore the needs of the grieving parents, but by the fact that they are grieving too, are unable to support, encourage or just sit and hold a hand of the parent. Jobs must be maintained, social obligations or activities for other children in the family must be attended which, because of the exhaustion created by the loss are, as mentioned before, already depleted, leave nothing in the well to communicate love and shared loss with the other spouse.

If these are other siblings younger or older to the child who had died, they are grieving too. They have not only lost a sibling, but they have also lost happy parents. As the parent struggles to survive the loss they can create a deep separation, unintentional as it may be, for their children who need comfort as well. Particular attention should be paid if the child who had died was suffering. Make it very clear to the sibling that the one who died is not suffering anymore. Explain that their brother/sister is happy and free of pain for eternity.

There is a direct correlation between support of one another, faith, and the absence of blame which validate the sustaining of a marriage relationship. Work at it. Trust God, and may these words be a part of the prayer and texture of living for each parent....."*Lord, you know the ache in my heart. You know the loss I am feeling, because your child died too. Help me to walk this journey from these difficult and dark times to the joy of living freely in your care. Open my eyes to blessings and thanksgivings as you lift the burden of loss I feel. Amen.*"

**Four steps to Contentment:** You must do all four of the Steps to find the contentment that you are seeking

**Weep** – Cry, but if you feel you will lose control of time, set a timer. DRINK WATER to replenish the chemicals lost in your tears. When you become dehydrated, the brain does not work. Thinking clearly and acting responsibly cannot be accomplished when the brain is not getting the hydrations it needs.

**Write** – Use a blank page book and write. Write about how you feel. Write about your dreams that are now lost. Write a letter or letters to your child with the advice you always wanted them to learn from you. Write on smaller pieces of paper thoughts you have during the day and put them in a memory box. Giving your thoughts a resting place will shut off the “tapes” that seems to be in a loop, running in the back ground of your mind all the time. If you wake in the night – write. No need for sentence structure or grammar rules, just write.

**Think** – Think about how this event can become the catalyst for good in your life. Think about how you will share your story with others who have had losses like yours. Think how you can support others when they come into your path who are feeling abandoned, angry, confused, betrayed, and resentful or perhaps shame. Be sure to include the hope you feel as you journey through this loss event into the new chapter of life you desire or have already experienced.

**Talk** – Talk to someone who will not judge you or offer the one size fits all solution. Utilize this event to share feelings with someone who will not encourage you to power through this or offer solutions to the puzzle of loss nor suggest spending money to fix the hurt. All three of those solutions, (power through, solve the problem and throw money at it) although offered with good intentions, are not the solution to nor an instant fix for grief. If you do use one or more of the suggestions above, you will likely feel like a failure which adds to your grief. The family leader who has always used these methods to resolve tough issues will find that they do not work for grief and loss.

The griever experiences loss in four areas. Physical, emotional, spiritual and intellectual. Changes in physical health, new feelings or emotions emerge, shifting perspective of faith and the ability to think clearly are normal.

You may have new or exacerbated **physical change**. Illness, increased or new digestive issues, headaches, body aches and other changes are often experienced by those in profound loss situations. See a Doctor and take care to get enough sleep, eat balanced meals and drink plenty of water. Health issues are normal.

Know that your **emotions** will likely be volatile or feel so submerged in grief that you feel nothing. That is normal.

Know that your **spiritual** life will change. No matter the faith relationship you have had in the past – it will change. That is normal.

Know that your **intellectual** ability to think and process tasks will be more difficult. Ask for help when faced with critical decisions. That is normal.

When you know that there will be changes and that the changes are normal, the knowledge gives you control. Control is key when the loss of your loved one feel like you are not in control.

Finally a note about the body chemistry that God designed into every human. Each human has a certain amount of Oxytocin in their body. It is the “love and cuddle” chemical that creates the bond with others. We feel it when we look at a cute puppy and certainly our body is flooded with it when we hold a child in our arms. It is the way God designed us so that we bond with our loved ones. When a child, or any person what we love is loss to us, there is a void created by the ongoing flow of oxytocin and “no place to settle the affection.” Some say it drives individuals to, as the song says, “Looking for love in all the wrong places.” It is also manifested as the “Empty Arms Syndrome” when an infant dies, this can be a contributing factor in an immediate pregnancy or urge to fill the void in unhealthy ways. It can lead to an affair which fills the need to find physical and emotional support outside of the marriage. Watchful awareness of how to find healthy ways to resettle oxytocin in the body is needed to avoid inappropriate behaviors and further losses of valuable relationships.

Read Psalm 23.

Note a few verses that directly apply to Gods model of grieving. Trust God to be your caregiver. He knows what you want at this very minute. He wants you to be calm as you rest by the still waters of life. You are to walk through the valley. Don't try to run through your grief. Don't be afraid. God will be with you. You can trust him to help you see one step at a time. And now, look at the table he has set for you. It is loaded with platters of blessings, bowls of joy and cups that overflow with contentment. The enemies are named, fear and emptiness. They can only stand by and watch. They have not influence on you. Hold on to the promise, that goodness and love will follow all the day of your life and that you, as well as your child, will dwell with God for eternity. For our time on earth is just a blink of an eye. Eternity if our final destination place. Your child got there sooner that you did. Certainly the death of a child is out of the cycle of life. Parents are not supposed to bury their child, but when that happens, the perspective of what is normal shifts from our expectations to those of God's expectations. Growing in trust and recognizing God's grace in the midst of loss is His new plan for you, as the family who has experienced such a loss. God is in control even when it is hard for us to see how that can be.

As we reflect on the events of Lazarus's death, Jesus said “*I will be glorified from this*”. You may not see that in the very early days and weeks after the loss, but God, in his wisdom, will comfort your heart and lift you as a witness to his goodness.

*God did not promise it was going to be easy. He did promise to be with us.*

Sharon Fox

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