

Parents Grief

In a sense, for parents, the death of their child is always sudden and unexpected. In our modern families, child death is rare compared with previous generations. This, in itself, creates a sense of injustice and disbelief that something like this could happen or that, with all the advanced medical intervention that now exists, a child has still died.

Another commonality for bereaved parents is their sense of responsibility – they were unable to protect their child from harm and that's an unwritten ground rule of parenting. Regardless of the cause of death, they can feel like a failure and blame themselves.

- **Anger** - at the unfairness, children shouldn't die before their parents, it violates the natural order of the way the world should work.
- **Questioning** – how could this happen? How could there be a God who allows such things? Did we do enough? Did the medical profession do their best? Should I have noticed something was wrong earlier? Why us? Why our child? The questions are endless.
- **Regrets** – about the times you argued, growled at our child, were too strict, didn't support their ideas, didn't spend enough time with them, criticised their grades or their clothes or their hair cut!
- **Longing and emptiness** – as you watch the children of friends grow up and enjoy their lives, when family events highlight the gap where the missing child should be, when your other children achieve milestones that this one won't, when other parents tell you about their children and their achievements.
- **Isolation** – you can feel like you don't fit in anymore – at family functions, social clubs, mother's group and places where you once accompanied your child. Fathers can feel left out of support – friends may be quick to ask how your wife is doing but forget to ask after you.

Parents also learn that the question, "How many children do you have?" can lead to an awkward conversation. If you include the one who died, people often don't know how to respond, but if you leave them out you can feel guilty for acting as if they don't matter anymore and have been forgotten.

Other children

When there are other children in the family, parents often struggle to attend to their emotional and physical needs when they are hardly able to help themselves. They are faced with balancing the ongoing household routines of school runs, homework, sports practice, cooking meals, shopping, going to work etc at a time where they have little energy or motivation to even get out of bed.

There can also be a danger that parents become preoccupied in idolising the child who died, with the remaining children feeling less valued and possibly resentful of their parents – and their 'perfect' sibling who died!

Effect on the marriage

According to Jean Galica, Marriage and Family Therapist, four major issues that grieving couples repeatedly reported resulting from the death of their child are:

- 1) sexual problems
- 2) emotional distance
- 3) more conflict and/or fighting
- 4) if the child was the glue that held their marriage together, they have a need to find a new foundation.

Galica explains;

“The belief that parents can get over the death of their child quicker and easier than other family members because they have each other to lean on is NOT so! The two were wedded into one and now they are two again in that each must bear their own pain. They have lost the same child, but the loss for each is unique. It is a simultaneous grief that has ripped each of them apart, there is nothing left inside and nothing left to give even to their spouse.”