PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Towards Tomorrow: A Guide for Bereaved Parents

This information describes some things you can do to help you cope with the loss of your child.

Healing after the death of your child may seem impossible to imagine right now, and your loss will always be a part of you. Understanding what grief is, taking care of yourself, and creating ways to honor your child are some of the ways you can look towards tomorrow. This resource explains some of the ways that you can cope with the loss of your child. While no book or guide can express all that you're going through, we hope you find it helpful.

What you may experience

Grief is a normal response to any loss, but the death of your child may bring about even more intense emotions. There are psychological, emotional, and physical effects of grief. How you experience your grief is unique to you.

Some parents feel numb or as if they're in a dream. Some can't sleep while others sleep all the time. You may feel overwhelmed with sadness, emptiness, and a feeling that your child's death just can't be real. Having more than one of these feelings at a time is normal.

Each person grieves in their own way and at their own pace. Mourning can feel like it takes up every minute of each day, making it hard to be present in the moment. Thinking about going back to your daily routine may feel like you're losing your connection with your child. Remember that there is no set schedule for what you're going through.

There will be milestones, like birthdays and holidays, that remind you of your

loss. Important events in the lives of other children you know may have you thinking about your own child and the experiences you expected to share with them. Anniversaries such as these can be especially painful, but they may also serve as opportunities to reconnect with traditions and rituals that were important to your child and family.

Approaching the days to come

Take your time

You may be thinking about decisions such as when you should go back to work, what to do with your child's belongings, or how to find purpose in your days. Take your time making these decisions. There is no time frame for when you should return to your daily routine or go back to work. Some people take comfort in a familiar routine while others need more time. If you must go back to work before you're ready, think about going back for just a few days at first or taking breaks throughout the day for when you need to be alone.

Forget right and wrong

There is no right or wrong way to handle what you're going through. Try not to compare yourself to others and how they manage their grief. The decisions of what to do with your child's belongings and how you're going to honor their memory belongs to you and your family. Think about these decisions when you're ready. Remember that making changes in your home doesn't mean you're any less connected to your child.

Stay connected and communicate

It's important that you and your family find ways to stay connected emotionally. This can feel challenging if you each have different ways of living with your loss. Some people grieve quietly, while others prefer to talk about it. Your needs may not always be obvious to your partner, parents, friends, or family. Try to communicate with the people in your life even when it feels hard to do so.

Talk to people who can support you in your grief. Different people can offer different kinds of support. Some people may have trouble approaching you

and may say the wrong thing once they do. You don't need to share everything with everyone. But choosing a friend or family member you can spend time with or talk to can help keep you connected as you grieve.

Honor your child through memories and rituals

Memories are powerful. Some can bring you comfort while others can be painful to think about. At first, you may think about your child's death more so than any other memory of them. This memory will always be with you, but the joyful time you spent with your child will also be with you.

Revisiting family traditions, or making new ones, is one way you and your family can stay connected to your memories. You and your family may find meaning in creating a memory box filled with objects belonging to or reminding you of your child. Talk with your family as you decide how you'll honor your child's memory.

How to support grieving siblings

A family is forever changed by the death of a child. If you have children who are grieving with you, they, like adults, may need help understanding and adjusting to life after loss.

Children express grief in different ways. How your child grieves will depend on their age, understanding of death, and the examples set by those around them. While younger children may not fully understand death, school-aged children will have a more mature understanding. They may feel guilty that they didn't die instead of their sibling or may become worried about themselves or even you dying. Some children may feel that their role within the family has changed and may take on adult responsibilities.

Most children can't handle the powerful emotions of grief for long periods of time. Instead, they may have episodes of short and intense outbursts of emotion followed by periods of play or other routine activity. They may also have physical reactions, like pain and aches in their body or changes in their sleep schedule. Some children may express their grief through changes in their behavior and act in ways they never have before. Other children may not show

any outward signs of sadness or grief. Remember that your child's behavior may be a sign that they're struggling with challenging feelings. The best way to understand your child's pain is to be mindful of the way they choose to express it. Pay attention to their behavior and listen to what they say.

Keep your child informed

Your child may have questions about how their sibling died and what that means. It's important to let them know that they can ask these questions. Do your best to answer them honestly. It's okay to tell them if you don't know the answer. As your child grows, they may have new questions about what happened. Approach each one as an opportunity to continue the conversation about their loss. It's also important to try and keep your child's routine as normal as possible and let them know about any changes they should expect. This can help reduce feelings of uncertainty about the future.

Include their support system

If your child is in school, build a network of important adults who spend time with them outside the home. Talk with your child's teachers, coaches, religious instructors, and other key figures about ways they can help support your child in their grief.

Spend time with them

Grief can make your child feel sad and alone. Try to spend some alone time with them each day so that they feel safe and supported. Taking a drive or a walk, cooking, or playing a game are some ideas of how to spend time together. Your child may have their own ideas of what they would like to do. They may or may not choose to talk about their grief during these times.

Listen and accept their feelings

Let your child know that their thoughts and feelings are okay and important to you. When they're ready to talk, try to listen without judgment or questions. This can be hard, especially if you don't understand your child's behavior and can't relate to how they're coping. Remember that their behavior can be a sign that they're struggling inside. Try to welcome their expression of emotion with love and acceptance. This will help them feel more comfortable sharing their

feelings with you.

Take care of yourself

The best thing you can do for your child is take care of yourself. You have experienced an unimaginable loss. Find a friend, family member, or counselor that you feel comfortable talking to, even if you're not sure what to say. Creating a support system for you and your family is important. Together, you can help your child feel loved and secure as you all work together to find a "new normal."

It's okay if you need help supporting your child. Helping others can be very difficult when you're coping with your own grief. If there is somebody that you and your child know and trust, ask for help. Your social worker can also help you find resources in your community.

When to seek additional help

There are times when seeking professional support for your child can be helpful, or even a necessary part of your child's care. This will depend upon many things including your relationship with your child, how your child copes with stress, and how they're coping with loss of their sibling. If you have concerns about your child's behavior and aren't sure about what steps to take next, talk with your social worker or your child's healthcare team for support.

Resources for you and your family

MSK resources

No matter where you are in the world, there is support available to you and your family. MSK offers a range of resources for grieving families and friends. You can learn more about these resources at www.mskcc.org/experience/caregivers-support/support-grieving-family-friends.

Towards Tomorrow Program

MSK Kids' Towards Tomorrow Program offers support and resources to bereaved families. Talk with your social worker and healthcare providers to review how you and your family are coping. They can also connect you with

additional support. For more information, call the Towards Tomorrow Program at 212-639-6850 or email towardstomorrow@mskcc.org. You can also visit www.mskcc.org/pediatrics/experience/life-pediatrics/support-services-care-teams.

MSK Counseling Center

646-888-0200

Some bereaved families find counseling helpful. Our psychiatrists and psychologists provide counseling and support to individuals, couples, and families who are grieving, as well as medicine to help if you feel depressed.

Spiritual Care

212-639-5982

Our chaplains are available to listen, help support family members, pray, contact community clergy or faith groups, or to simply be a comforting person and a spiritual presence. Anyone can request spiritual support, regardless of your religious affiliation.

Additional resources

Bereaved Parents of the USA (BPUSA)

www.bereavedparentsusa.org

BPUSA is a national nonprofit organization that provides support to bereaved parents and their families.

The Compassionate Friends (TCF)

630-990-0010

www.compassionatefriends.org

TCF is a national nonprofit organization that works to support parents, siblings, grandparents, and other family members grieving the loss of a child. They offer an online support community and educational workshops.

Alive Alone

www.alivealone.org

Alive Alone is a national network of parents who have lost an only child or all of their children. They provide newsletters, education, and resources to promote healing.

GriefNet
www.griefnet.org
GriefNet provides online support groups for different types of loss, including the loss of a child.

Comfort Zone Camps
866-488-5679
www.comfortzonecamp.org
Comfort Zone Camps is for children who have experienced the death of a loved one.

Camp Erin
https://elunanetwork.org/eluna-camps/camp-erin/
Camp Erin is for children who have experienced the death of a loved one.

The Dougy Center for Grieving Children and Families
503-775-5683
www.dougy.org
This center provides support, education and resource information for grieving children and families.

Sesame Workshop
https://sesameworkshop.org/topics/grief/
This website offers resources to help children understand death and cope with grief.

CancerCare
800-813-4673
www.cancercare.org/tagged/grief_and_loss
CancerCare's social workers provide support and resources for people who have experienced the loss of a loved one to cancer.

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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