

Towards Tomorrow: A Guide for Bereaved Parents

This information describes how you can cope with the loss of your child. We hope it's helpful to you and your family.

The idea of healing after the death of your child may seem hard to imagine right now. No book or guide can express what you're going through. The pain of your loss will always be a part of you, but understanding what grief is, taking care of yourself, and creating ongoing ways to honor your child are some of the ways you can look towards tomorrow.

What You May Experience

There is no greater pain than losing your child. Grief is a normal response to any loss, but the death of your child may bring about more intense emotions. There are psychological, emotional, and physical effects of grief. What you experience 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 cannot be real. Some days you may have more energy than others. Having more than 1 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. The idea of moving forward in any way may feel impossible. 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 and no right or wrong way to grieve.

The passage of time

You may also experience time differently following the death of your child. Time can feel like it's moving both fast and slowly. How the passing of time will affect your grieving is not always predictable.

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.

How to Cope With the Loss of Your Child

Here are some things to keep in mind as you approach the days to come.

Take your time

You may be thinking about the decisions you will need to make in the near future, such as when you should go back to work, how to find purpose in your days, or what to do with your child's belongings. These decisions are yours to make. Take your time making them and do what is best for you and your family.

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 may need more time. If you must go back to work before you're ready, take small 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 cope with their own grief.

You get to decide what you wish to do with your child's belongings and how you're going to honor their memory. These decisions belong 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, your parent, or your friend, so it's important to find ways to feel connected to others even when it feels hard to do so.

Maintaining open and ongoing communication with those who are able to support and talk with you about your experience is important. People may have difficulty 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 talk with can help keep you connected as you grieve.

Helping your children

If you have children that are grieving with you, the way they grieve will depend on their age, understanding of death, and the examples set by those around them. They may deal with loss in different ways and at different times.

You may not always agree with how they're coping, but you can listen and try to understand one another as you figure out this new way of living with your loss. You can also spend some time answering their questions and encouraging them to express their feelings.

If you're having trouble talking to your children, ask a family member, friend, or professional counselor to help you with this. Your social worker can give you more information on supportive services available to you and your family.

Helping Your Child Cope With the Loss of Their Sibling (www.mskcc.org/cancer-care/patient-education/helping-your-child-cope-loss-their-sibling) is a resource that can help you help your children cope with the loss of their sibling. You can ask your social worker for it or search for it on our website at www.mskcc.org/pe.

Honor memories through 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 joyful moments 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. Different cultures and faiths have rituals to honor someone's memory. Sometimes families create their own rituals like getting together for a special meal or planting a garden. A ritual can also be time that you put aside to be alone with your thoughts.

Remember to talk with your family as you decide how you will honor your child's memory.

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. Memorial Sloan Kettering (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

The Department of Pediatrics' [Towards Tomorrow Program](#) offers support and resources to bereaved families, including:

In-Person Meetings

Our in-person parent bereavement support group is led by a social worker and nurse. We invite all parents who have lost a child to cancer at MSK to join.

Parent-to-Parent Outreach

Parent-to-Parent Outreach is a program that can connect you with parents across the country that have also experienced the loss of a child to cancer.

For more information about these programs or to sign up, call Towards Tomorrow at 212-639-6850 or email towardstomorrow@mskcc.org

MSK Counseling Center

646-888-0200

Some bereaved families find counseling helpful. Our psychiatrists and psychologists lead a bereavement clinic that provides counseling and support to individuals, couples, and families who are grieving, as well as medications to help if you feel depressed.

Chaplaincy Services

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 formal religious affiliation.

Additional Resources

There are books, educational resources, and community support programs available to parents and siblings. For more information about these programs, or to talk about your loss, call your social worker.

Bereaved Parents of the USA (BPUSA)

www.bereavedparentsusa.org

National nonprofit organization that provides support to bereaved parents and their families.

The Compassionate Friends (TCF)

630-990-0010

www.compassionatefriends.org

National nonprofit organization that works to support parents, siblings, grandparents, and other family members grieving the loss of a child. Offers an online support community and educational workshops.

Alive Alone

www.alivealone.org

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

Provides online support groups for different types of loss, including the loss of a child.

If you have any questions, contact a member of your healthcare team directly. If you're a patient at MSK and you need to reach a provider after 5:00 PM, during the weekend, or on a holiday, call 212-639-2000.

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

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