

A black and white photograph of a teddy bear sitting on a wooden rocking chair. The bear is positioned in the center-right of the frame, facing forward. The chair is a classic wooden rocking chair with a woven seat. In the background, there is a window with a view of a city skyline, including several tall buildings. The room has a wooden floor. The overall mood is somber and reflective.

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*"No matter how deep your sorrow, you are not alone. Others have been there and will help share your load if you will let them. Do not deny them the opportunity."*

*Amy Hilliard Jensen*

Most of us learn of grief through experiencing the loss of loved ones. And while we mourn the death of a beloved grandparent we are usually able to accept that death as a final phase of life. The death of a child, however, is unacceptable. When a child dies not only does death destroy the hopes and dreams for the future but it also forces us to face an event we are unwilling to accept. Many wonder if life will have meaning again. And remember, recovery takes time.

There is neither a right nor wrong way to approach grief. Each of us must establish our own means of dealing with it. There is, however, a pattern to resolving grief and others have suffered losses and experienced intense grief and have survived. As parents, it is crucial that you realize you are not alone. Others care, and they are willing and able to help.



## The Stages of Grief

Often, first reactions following the death of a child are shock, disbelief, denial, or numbness. Many parents feel that they are "in a fog" during the first few weeks after their child's death; simply "being an observer" to all that is going on. These reactions are nature's way of helping you confront the loss of your child. They may last minutes, hours, days, or weeks.

Normal as they are, these reactions can be deceptive to others who are not familiar with the grieving process. They may incorrectly assume that you either "hold up well," or that you are insensitive and incapable of expressing the loss. What they fail to realize is that shock, disbelief, denial, and numbness allow you to begin to face the tragic occurrence without losing control.

Subconsciously, you alone will determine when you are better able to face the child's death. Crying, or some similar emotional release, usually marks the end of this initial stage of grief.

When the child's death becomes a reality, intense suffering and physical pain usually begin. During the weeks and months that follow, you may be frightened by the intensity and the variety of the feelings you experience. Crying, weeping, and incessant talking are common. In spite of any consolation offered, you may feel very much alone.

It is important to allow yourself full expression of your feelings and emotions at the time when an emotion is first experienced. Don't try to "hold it in."

**GUILT** As you try to understand why *your* child died, feelings of guilt may begin. You may blame yourself or your spouse for something you did or did not do. "If only" becomes an often heard phrase. Many parents dwell on all the things that they feel they should have done for the child. Either parent can feel guilty for not giving the child a toy or special treat.

Remember, these feelings are normal and there is no rational basis for them. Talking with someone who will allow you to express your feelings and who can help dispel the irrationality of your guilt can be extremely helpful.

**ANGER** Depending on your own personality, you may express feelings ranging from mild anger to rage. You may direct this anger at yourself, your spouse, at the physician, or even at the child for having died. Religious beliefs may be questioned and you may find yourself angry at a God who allows children to die.

These feelings can cause an extreme amount of anxiety, even though they are normal and are experienced by many. Anger that is suppressed can do a great deal of damage. You can express anger healthily and work through it in a number of ways: screaming in private, beating on a pillow and strenuous exercise often help.

**FEAR** At times you may fear that another horrible tragedy is going to happen, and become extremely overprotective of your other children. At the same time you may find yourself fearing responsibilities of being a parent.

**DEPRESSION** As you continue to work through your grief, depression sometimes sets in. The symptoms can take different forms for different people. Some may feel constantly "down," unhappy, "blue," or sad; others may feel worthless or as though somehow they have failed. Many are continually lethargic, tired or listless. This can be an ideal time to become involved in some type of activity. However, try to avoid frantic activity which, like running away, pushes aside the reality of the child's death.

As you begin to recover, depression will lift slowly. "Down" times will still be with you but the time between "downs" will become longer. It's a process which may take years. But, resolution and recovery will come.



## OTHER SYMPTOMS

You may find that thoughts of your child are constantly with you. Aching arms, hearing the child cry, or continuing with routine tasks of caring for the child are all normal experiences for grieving parents.

You may find it is difficult to concentrate for any length of time. Your mind may wander making it difficult to read, write, or make decisions.

Your arms may ache to hold the missing child and you may experience pain in the area around the heart or in the stomach.

Hearing the child cry or continuing with routine tasks of caring for the child are all normal experiences.

Sleep may be disrupted, leaving you overtired and edgy. Even with sleep, the feeling of exhaustion may persist. Many times there is an irresistible urge to escape. Normal as all these reactions are, most people experiencing them often fear that they are losing control. Talking about your feelings with others who have experienced a similar loss can sometimes be extremely helpful.

Many have reported that in caring for a terminally ill child they experience these same reactions following diagnosis of the illness. Caring for the child helps some parents accept the reality of eventual loss and softens the anguish at the time the child dies.

People express their grief differently and many have difficulty sharing their feelings. Relatives and friends, busy with their own lives, may be uncomfortable with the actuality of death, or may be unable to meet your need for comfort and support. For some, clergymen, physicians, counselors, and other bereaved parents may be of help. It is important to remember, however, that no one but yourself can resolve your grief. This resolution can be achieved only by experiencing and working through these emotions.





## How Children Approach Grief

A few special words should be said about how children approach grief.

Since many of us are unable to accept death, particularly in the early stages of grief, we assume that our other children cannot cope with it. We try to shield them from the tragedy and leave them out of the mourning and rituals associated with the death. Anxious, bewildered and alone, they cannot seek answers at a time when they most need the help and reassurance of those they love most. Regardless of their abilities to express their feelings, children do suffer grief, often at a very deep level.

As discussed earlier, grief is an intensely individual matter. This holds true for children who may express their grief as:

**SHOCK** The thought of death is so overwhelming that your child will act as though nothing has happened.

**PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS** Headaches or stomachaches can be compounded by your child's own fear of death.

**ANGER** Your child feels anger toward the person who died for leaving him "all alone" or angry because God didn't "make the person well."

**GUILT** Your child may blame himself for wishing his sibling harm or for not having been "better" in some way.

**ANXIETY AND FEAR** Your child may fear that he, himself, or some other person he loves will die.

**REGRESSION** Behavior such as bedwetting or thumb-sucking may reappear.

**SADNESS** The child may become quiet and much less active.

Again we must remember that these are normal reactions and should pass with time.

## Ways to Help Your Children

Encourage your children to ask questions and be prepared to give honest and simple answers. When questions are asked again and again, more is being asked than the question would indicate. Speak at a language level the child can understand. Remember to listen and try to understand what is being asked, and also, what is *not* being asked. Your children should feel that they are free to express their thoughts or questions. Be patient and continue to express your love.

Share your own feelings with your children and encourage them to be open about theirs. Remember you are their role model for how one goes about expressing grief. Loving and caring and expressing our feelings of love are extremely beneficial at a time of loss.

Discuss the cause of death at a level your children can understand and reassure them that their thoughts and feelings were in no way responsible for the death.

Explain the rituals for the funeral and let your children decide how they will participate. Don't insist that they do anything that is not comfortable for them.

Be supportive if your children show any regressive behaviors, and remember, these regressions are only temporary.



## Some Answers That Will Not Help

Often when a loved one dies, we think we are protecting our children by offering simple, but evasive answers to their questions. These answers often confuse our children and increase their fear and uncertainty. Remember, children tend to take things literally. If we tell our children that someone has gone on a long trip, they will expect that person to return and perhaps feel guilty that they drove the person away.

If we tell our children that someone is sleeping peacefully, the child will begin to fear sleep.

Our children will not understand explanations such as "It was God's will," since they still need that person themselves. If we tell them "Billy was so good that God took him," then our children may decide to be bad so they won't die too.

In talking with our children about death remember that honesty, compassion and above all, love, are essential in helping them through this time.

## Resolving the Loss

As you accept the finality of your loss, recovery occurs. You begin to take an active role in events and your life begins to have meaning once again. The pain of death becomes less intense but not forgotten. Birthdays, holidays, and the anniversary of the child's death can trigger periods of intense pain and suffering, but as time passes, the painful days become less frequent.

There is no set time frame for recovery. Be comforted by the thought that it does occur. The process is slow, but it will happen. Be patient, be caring, and most of all, be loving.

