



For Grieving Fathers



LOMA LINDA UNIVERSITY
HEALTH



There are many other fathers just like you, raised in the same society, faced with the same issues and roadblocks to recovery that you have who have lost a child and have traveled the path to healing successfully.

Fathers

Your child has died. The world you so carefully planned for and worked to make safe for your family has been shattered by this devastating loss, an event that you, the father, were powerless to prevent.

This is a time when many feelings will surface, but unfortunately you may not be able to express them in a manner that lessens your pain or grief. You have been conditioned by the society in which you were raised to not cry, to not share feelings, to be a “man of action, not words,” to be a provider and protector, a problem solver, a self-sufficient man in charge of his own life and the world in which his family lives. The death of your little one is not something that any of society’s conditioning has prepared you for. Now, facing devastation of the most unimaginable type, you may be “locked down,” unable to express the myriad feelings that you are experiencing as you try to find your way through the unknown path ahead, that path of healing your pain and resolving your grief. The work ahead seems overwhelming and the society in which you live offers few tools to aid you.

It may help you to know that there are four phases of grief and to become familiar with some expected feelings and behaviors during each of these phases. While there is no set time frame for each of these phases or for the entire healing to take place, one thing is sure: there are many other fathers just like you, raised in the same society, who have lost a baby or child and have traveled the path to healing successfully. Because our society has such rigid views of the acceptable ways a man may express feelings and emotions, you may feel limited at first in the ways you express yourself. But as you become more comfortable with the things you learn on your journey, you will realize that there are many ways you can express your deepest emotions, and learn to cope with your grief.

Shock and Numbness

Shock and numbness is the first phase of grief and is predominant for the first couple of weeks following a loss. You may experience times when you simply cannot believe that your child has died. Life may have a surreal quality to it, a feeling of unreality as you try to get through the first few days of your loss. In addition to your own feelings, you may be aware of your wife's and perhaps other children's feelings and needs. You may feel powerless to help them, or resentful that they are looking to you at a time when nothing seems to make sense. This can be a very frustrating time for you. Society tells you to be strong, protecting yourself and your family, but you are unable to be strong for yourself, much less anyone else. It may help you to realize that all the members of your family are experiencing the same shock you are. Just the admission that you are experiencing similar feelings will bring comfort. It may be difficult for you to admit this to your wife and children but your openness can bring you closer at this time, with the knowledge that you are all on common ground from which you can grow together in healing.

Searching and Yearning

Another phase of the grief process is searching and yearning, which often lasts a month or two. During this time you may find yourself spending time in your child's room, holding or looking at objects that your child loved, and remembering happy times shared. You may also find yourself going over and over the events leading to your child's death in an effort to find answers as to how and why it occurred. You may feel anger, lots of it, as you relive those events, wondering if things could have been different if only you had made other choices, if only the doctor had tried some other treatment, if only your wife had done something different, if only your child had lived the way you thought he or she should. Anger is a very common emotion at this time, either directed at yourself, someone close to you or someone involved in the care of your child.

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It is normal to feel this anger, but important to choose a healthy outlet for it. Directing it at yourself will only increase your negative feelings. Directing it at your loved ones will only compound their own feelings of grief and loss. Directing it at the ones involved in your child's care will not bring your child back. Now is a good time to seek out other fathers who have experienced similar losses. You may also find it helpful to speak with a pastor or friend about your anger. You may want to write your feelings down in a journal. Sharing your feelings with your wife can be very helpful to you both. It's important to realize that although she is experiencing the same grief you are, and you may have been a source of strength to each other in the past, at this time you may not be able to remain in that supportive role. Men and women grieve differently, and your wife may not be in the same phase you are, nor is it likely she will work through her grief in the same manner you do. Whatever you choose, it is important to realize that you are not alone and there are many people in your life who care about and love you, especially those with whom you share your daily life. Shared hugs, holding a hand and just sitting quietly in thought can all be very comforting during this time of yearning for the child you have lost.

Disorientation and Disorganization

This is the longest phase of grief and can be an extremely difficult time. Because of the pressure placed on you by society, taking time to sort things out, or withdrawing from usual activities may not be considered acceptable. As the man of the house, the "strong" one, you may be expected to push your feelings aside and move on with your life, personally and professionally. Yet you are haunted by questions such as why your child died, why this tragedy struck your family and why you have to face this terrible loss. You may experience a variety of reactions such as extreme fatigue, loss of appetite, inability to think clearly and lack of motivation at home or on the job. Conversely, you may find yourself driven to work more than usual, or have difficulty sleeping. You may feel that your life is out of control and seek ways to stay away from home where you are constantly reminded of your loss due to the grieving of your family members and physical reminders of the child who has died. You may find it easier to talk to strangers instead of the ones to whom your life is tied. All of these behaviors and feelings are normal. It is important to be careful during this time. You are very vulnerable and it may be difficult for you to make good decisions about how to spend your time and with whom to spend

it. Although this is a phase that will pass, it is a very threatening phase to men especially, and seeking support in your marriage or from other family members can be very helpful. Your wife may be relieved to hear you express concern over the same issues she has been dealing with; thus this can become a time of closeness that you would otherwise miss if you chose not to be open with your feelings.

Resolution and Reorganization

Over time, much of the cloud under which you feel you have been living will lift. You will find life returning to a place that you recognize as normal for you. This does not mean that you will no longer grieve for your child or be sad at times. It simply means that you have begun to find meaning in everyday life again. You will begin to enjoy some of the things you thought you might never enjoy again, such as the song of a bird, the smile on a coworker's face, the little nuances of life that uplift the heart and refresh the spirit. The pain of your loss will no longer be such a searing, burning pain, and you will be able to remember and talk about your child without feeling an overwhelming sense of anger and loss. You will be able to speak with other fathers about loss and be able to give comfort as well as receive it. You will be able to share time with your wife and children and enjoy it for what it is instead of thinking only of the child who is not there to enjoy it with you. You will know that even though you have lost a child, and your hopes and dreams for that child can never be realized, you will go on and continue to do the best you can for yourself and your family, as you were doing before you faced this tragedy.

It is not possible to face the loss that you have experienced and remain unchanged. You will never be exactly the same as you were before. You will have learned and experienced life through the loss of your child in a way that is unique to you. No two people grieve in exactly the same way or for the same length of time. Your legacy to the child who died too soon can be a resolution of your grief that brings you to a place of higher understanding, deeper spirituality and a more strongly developed sense of what is most meaningful in this earthly life.

By Eileen Langford, RN



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