



Bereaved Parents of the USA

A support group for parents, grandparents and siblings who have suffered the death of a child, grandchild or sibling.

SUDDEN DEATH

It is recognized that there is no good way to lose a child, just different ways, and all of them hard. Parents, whose children die from an acute sudden illness, an accident, murder or suicide, have to contend with the fact that they've had no warning. As a result, it is as though pieces of their lives were amputated without benefit of anesthesia. The shock that follows puts cotton where the brain used to be. These parents have to deal with the void left in their lives. The day to day parenting ceased at the moment of the death.

There are a number of emotions that are normal symptoms of grief after learning of the death, no matter how it occurred. Some of them are:

SHOCK

Shock usually lasts from one to several days. It is what enables some parents to go through the process of preparing for the funeral of someone they love. Shock numbs the senses and doesn't allow the full impact of the death to come crashing through in the very beginning.

DENIAL

Denial is a way of refusing to admit that the death has occurred. It can last for varying lengths of time for various people, for some can't deal with the pain right away. It seems simpler to pretend, instead, that the person who died is not really dead, for example, but is away at school, away at his/her own home or asleep in his/her own bed, etc. Denial doesn't last forever and, with time, the reality of the loss settles in.

ANGER

Anger is one of the most exhausting emotions that exists with grief. It is thought by some that the intense anger experienced by some bereaved parents is an effort to postpone the pain of grief. Anger is an easier emotion to deal with than grief. Grief is very patient, however, and there does come a time when it can no longer be denied. It is a wise parent who realizes that postponement accomplishes nothing.

There are any number of people at whom the parents can direct their anger, depending on who the parents feel justly or unjustly are to blame for the death. Some blame the doctors and/or nurses who attended the child at the time of the death; the spouse, if he or she is grieving differently; friends or neighbors who have not had the experience of losing a child; the child himself or herself, if the parents feel that the child was careless and in some way was responsible for the death.

In time, most parents realize that anger eats the container in which it is held and that the person must let go of the anger if one is ever to regain any peace.

GUILT

Someone has said if you can separate your grief from your guilt, you cut your grief in half. There is much truth in that statement. Being human, none of us is totally free from regret over something large or small that was in some way connected with a child who died.

The brain, being the devious thing that it can be at times, seems determined to punish the parents by recalling even the smallest thing that makes them regret not having been more patient or less patient, more demanding or less demanding, more firm or less firm, more loving or less loving, more sensitive, more capable, in other words, more perfect.

Feelings of guilt are thought by some to be an attempt to make some sense of the senselessness of a child's death, or an answer to the unanswerable WHY. Parenting instincts tell the parents that they are responsible for whatever happens to their child, good or bad.

There are two kinds of guilt: Healthy Guilt, which acts as an alarm clock when we sense our behavior is inappropriate, and Excessive Guilt, which is unhealthy. It is not rational, logical or reasonable. Some parents hang onto their guilt (and anger) because to do so postpones the acceptance of their child's death.

Professionals who counsel grieving people find it very helpful for parents to talk about their guilt. By verbalizing, they are able to hear the craziness of excessive guilt and recognize it for what it is. No amount of guilt ever changed anything. Excessive guilt is a wasted emotion. It drains the parents as they dwell on it, and takes away opportunities to change and learn. Guilt is useful when planning ahead, pointless when looking back.

AGE

If the child was younger, more totally dependent upon the parents, whose being is still a wonder to them, or one they had no opportunity to nurture, the parents have problems coping with the loss of the experience of watching a child grow and mature. They are left to wonder what kind of person would have developed in this child. Their grief involves what was and what might have been.

Teenagers, who are in the process of trying to become independent, often have conflicts with the mothers and fathers, and will leave home angry. The parents have to live with whatever the relationship was at the time of the death, with no opportunity to remedy the situation. There is no opportunity for "I'm sorry," "I love you," or "Goodbye." The child may have died alone or among strangers. Not having been there at the time of death is difficult and fertile ground for the guilt of "what ifs" and the "if onlys."

If the child was older, maybe even an adult, the parents had been through more of the growing-up process and already knew the child's potential. In that case, they grieve for what was and all that had been and could have been.

INTENSITY and DURATION

It is important to remember that the pain of intense grief doesn't last forever. The parents will always remember their child and grieve for him or her. We feel that the pain will never soften, but it will, for man is not made so that the pain of fresh grief can last forever. It takes some time, and that time varies from person to person, for parents have to learn to live with their loss more comfortably. That is not to say that we will get over the grief, but it can soften so that memories that once caused so much pain can become memories that are comforting. Look forward to that time.

*Written by Mary Cleckley
in memory of Jack Cleckley,
son of Mary and John Cleckley*

The Bereaved Parents of the USA is a non-profit, self-help organization that offers friendship, support and understanding to bereaved parents (including foster and step-parents), grandparents and siblings after the death of a child, grandchild or sibling regardless of the age of the child or the cause of death. Individuals differ but are all alike in seeking ways to overcome grief. Grieving people can adjust and life eventually can have meaning again.

Other brochures which are available are:

Bereaved Parents of the USA – Information
Prolonged Illness
Suicide
For Bereaved Grandparents
When a Child Dies: What Medical Personnel Can Do
Emergency Personnel: How to Help the Family
After the Sudden Illness, Injury or Death of a Child

For further information, contact BP/USA at PO Box 95, Park Forest, IL 60466 or by calling 708-748-7866. Our website, www.bereavedparentsusa.org is also available on the internet. You may find out about chapter locations and other groups which offer help and you may read the current and past newsletters and other publications and brochures there. Information about our annual Gathering is also posted on the web.