

## MANAGING THE INTENSE EMOTIONS OF GRIEF

Conventional wisdom suggests that I devote this writing to tips on how to start feeling better. But you may be wondering how you can even survive. You may also not want to feel better. The thought of feeling better may actually feel disrespectful -- like trying to “let go” before you’re ready.

That’s okay. Grief is not some sort of awkward, embarrassing “condition” that should be “gotten over” or “healed” as soon as possible. In reality, grief is our final expression of love, the last gift we have to offer. It isn’t to be rushed. Our grief is a unique, yet universal, experience of a human being capable of loving. The more intense the feelings, the deeper the witness to the intensity of love shared.

Perhaps the most vital step in coping with the emotions you feel upon the loss of your child is acknowledging them. Let yourself feel—write down your feelings, cry your heart out, scream your anger to the skies, or pound out your guilt on the floor. Far from being childish, these actions let you get your feelings into the open. There you can look at them and begin to understand them, which is a healthy start on releasing them on the journey of healing. Know that it is your right to be upset.

Of the complex jumble of emotions that may follow the death of a child, three stand out as particularly difficult to acknowledge or understand, and therefore to work through: anger, guilt and depression.

Focusing anger on a target of blame is a distraction. Psychologist Toni Grant often noted that a person can focus on only one strong emotion at a time; thus, if you have focused all your energy into anger, you have little time to feel your pain. But acknowledging your pain is an essential part of the grieving process, so while the distraction of anger may temporarily seem to ease your feelings, in the long run, it only serves to prolong an already unbearable situation.

Embrace the anger. Accept it and embrace it. You’re angry because of the pain that your child’s death has caused. That’s, dare I say, normal. You’re angry because you loved your child and wanted them to stay close to you always. Recognize that anger as both normal and human. So, as long as you don’t hurt yourself or anyone else, you have permission to be angry. Once you have accepted and embraced your anger, you can begin to work on channeling that anger into positive action to keep your child’s memory alive every day of your life.

When we become a parent, we become immediately pre-disposed to feel guilt. We feel responsible for everything that happens to our children, including events beyond our control. Just as anger can prevent you



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from recovering from grief, guilt can be an equally dangerous distraction. Left unchecked, it can become an impediment in your grief journey unless you choose to change direction. Notice that I said “choose.” While we can’t always control how we feel, we can choose to not be controlled by our emotions. However, guilt is not simply an emotion. At its core, guilt is a belief—a conviction that we have failed or done wrong and must suffer for it. The only way to break that conviction is to change what we choose to believe.

Here are some choices that can help you take the upper hand over guilt:

- Choose not to rehearse guilt by repeating the same guilty thoughts over and over. They won’t go away by themselves—you must choose to make them stop. When you start wandering down that painful mental path, put up a mental stop sign, or choose a physical action, such as snapping your fingers, to remind yourself to change direction. Tell yourself: “I’m not going there right now.” Then, deliberately focus on something positive in the future as a conscious reminder that there is more to your life than guilt over the past.
- Choose to accept what cannot be changed. Accepting the reality of your loss takes time and intention. “Should have,” “could have” or other wishful thinking doesn’t change or make up for the past; it simply ruins your future. Can you undo what happened? None of us can, but we can make choices today, right now, which will change our future.
- Though depression can result from a variety of things, including purely physical causes, we often associate depression with an event that has caused profound emotional pain or high levels of stress. The death of a child is certainly that type of triggering event. It is traumatic, painful and stressful; it creates a situation that plunges a person into a whirlpool of emotions—an event that one may very well wish to withdraw from rather than confront.

Although depression is a logical result of the loss of your child, it is also a state of mind that can impede your healing if it becomes prolonged. There are countless tips from the medical profession to help lift you from the spiral of depression.

- If all you have the energy for is a long, hot bath with soothing music, start there. Maybe soon you will feel like a walk with a friend. Isolation is not your friend.
- Have a cup of tea with someone who is a good listener. Sit on the patio and let the sun warm you.

These are simple first steps to become an active partner in feeling better. If you find yourself not feeling better in a few months, talk with your doctor or a mental health professional.

Powerful emotions are an integral part of grief. You won’t be able to avoid them, and in some cases, in the right proportions, these emotions can be helpful to you in negotiating the grief swamp.



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Constructive anger, for example, can move you to learn more about a disease or condition, give you a feeling of accomplishment and a desire to share your knowledge and insights with others.

Forgiveness is not some abstract religious concept. It is a rock-bottom necessity in life, and now you need to make it the foundation of your healing. Don't let guilt keep you locked in a lifetime of misery. Choose to forgive yourself, to keep loving and to move forward. Those you love need you! The world needs you!

Feeling helpless and hopeless is a symptom of depression—not the reality of your situation. The key to depression recovery is to start small and ask for help. The simple act of talking to someone face to face can be an enormous help. The person you talk to doesn't have to be able to fix you; he or she just needs to be a good listener.

Grieving is a personal and highly individual experience. How you grieve depends on many factors, including your personality and coping style, your life experience, your faith and the nature of the loss. The grieving process takes time. Healing happens gradually; it can't be forced or hurried—and there is no “normal” time table for grieving. Some start to feel better in weeks or months. For others, the grieving process is measured in years.

Grief also is an experience that will recur over and over after a loss, and through that repetition comes the slow easing of pain. Each time, one experiences a little more consolation, a little more healing. Rather than “recovery” or “resolution,” which suggests a return to pre-loss functioning, “reconciliation,” and “reconstitution” are often preferred terms to describe the post-death period because they more adequately reflect the profound changes that take place when a child dies. Whatever your grief experience, it's important to be patient with yourself and allow the process to naturally unfold.

—*Mara Goebel, Hospice of the Valley*



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