



## When a Child Dies

by Fredda Wasserman, MA, MPH, LMFT, CT

When a child dies, there are few words that can describe the level of grief, devastation and anguish experienced by the parents. We might be able to accept the death of someone who is very old, who has led a long, productive life, and feels “ready”. But how do we come to terms with the death of a child?

Some parents watch their child take their last breath as they cradle them in their arms. Some receive the news when the police officer rings the doorbell and informs them of the random gunfire that took their child’s life. No matter how the death occurs, no matter how they learn of the death, the first reactions of the parent will most likely be shock and disbelief. *How can this have happened to us? There must be some mistake; you must have the wrong family; perhaps you were looking for the family next door.*

How often we hear others judge parents’ disbelief as being an *unhealthy* form of denial. When in reality, shock and disbelief are nature’s natural anesthetic. It is the body’s involuntary striving for self-soothing.

We see this when a child dies in a tragic accident and the glazed-eyed parent’s immediate reaction is “Well, she is better off...she is with God now.” Their minds are trying to make sense out of chaos. Caroline’s parents felt a sense of peace and calm as they sat at her side, whispering soothing words as she died peacefully in her own bed at home after a long illness. They watched the hospice nurses bathe and dress her and placed a bouquet of flowers from the garden in her hands. As the morticians arrived, however, Caroline’s mother begged them not to put her into a body bag. Another mother ran barefoot through the street in the middle of the night, chasing after the ambulance with cries of “bring him back, bring him back.”

In the weeks and months after the death, many feelings, emotions and behaviors will

emerge. It will seem like a roller-coaster ride. Feelings of confusion, inability to concentrate, disturbances in eating and sleeping are to be expected. Sudden “grief bursts” may erupt just when the parent seemed to be “doing better”. At times, there will be identifiable triggers and at other times, feelings will come from out of the blue. It might be a song, a fragrance, or a story in the newspaper. It might be a significant date on the calendar. It might be hearing a child in the mall cry “Mommy” and feeling certain it is their child’s voice.

After the death of a child, parents might talk about having no purpose in life and not knowing if they can go on. They say that when a parent dies, you lose your link to the past; when a spouse dies, you lose your link to the present; but when a child dies, you lose your link to the future. It is understandable, then, when a parent says that they wouldn’t care if they didn’t wake up the next morning. It is important that these feelings are taken very seriously, and professional help be sought, if a parent is talking about having an actual intention or plan to end their lives. However, more commonly they are expressing feelings that are normal under the circumstances. Finding purpose, meaning and reason to go on in life again after the death of a child can take a very long time.

There is often the expectation that grievers should be finished with their grieving after a given period of time. One unrealistic expectation is that after the first year, grief will no longer be as difficult. After all, the parents will have maneuvered through the first Thanksgiving, Passover Seder, and a myriad of other significant dates in the calendar. But how will they ever be able to celebrate their wedding anniversary, which just happens to fall two days before the date of their child’s death? Granted, they got through the first Mother’s Day, but in the second year the reality

sets in that their child will not be here for *any* Mother’s Day, ever.

When will the parents’ lives return to “normal”? They will never return to the *old* normal. The very fabric of their lives has been irreparably altered. But there will come a time when the fond memories of the child will wash over them like a warm summer breeze. They will rejoice in their child’s accomplishments and the contributions their child made to the family and to the world.

Friends and family often wonder how they can be supportive to grieving parents. What can they say or do that will help? Here is a list of suggestions:

1. Just be there... in any way you can.
2. Don’t say “Call me if you need anything”. A grieving parent doesn’t know what he or she needs right now. But maybe you can help out with the grocery shopping, do a load of laundry, or transport the surviving children to or from activities.
3. Share a cup of tea and share a story or a fond memory of the child.
4. Give them the opportunity to express anger, regret, and guilt, in addition to feelings of loneliness, sadness, and confusion. Telling someone NOT to feel the way they do will only add to their distress.
5. Be there in the middle of the night at the other end of the telephone...or invite them to e-mail you 24/7...and reply to their feelings with understanding and acceptance.
6. Help them memorialize their child by acknowledging that you haven’t forgotten the specialness of that child; find ways to include their memory at a holiday gatherings or other special events

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Our only daughter, Cathy Jo, was born with mild cerebral palsy in 1961. We didn't know if she would be able to walk or talk, but we didn't have to wonder for long; Cathy Jo never stopped amazing us.

Happy, healthy, and outgoing, she lived a very full life. When her school started a theater for the handicapped, she was one of the first students to

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perform, and later she joined the bowling team. She was a broad jumper in the Special Olympics for 15 years.

In 1997, Cathy Jo was having her hair cut when her hairdresser noticed a lump on her head. She told Cathy Jo to see a doctor and have it checked out. Ever fearful of doctors, Cathy Jo stopped getting hair cuts. It was around this time I noticed she had begun wearing baseball caps all the time. I first felt the lump while hugging my daughter goodbye. She told me she hit her head on the refrigerator. We knew better.

When we learned that it was melanoma we immediately knew the gravity of it. The doctors told us there was a 98% chance our daughter would die within two years. Ever the optimist, I said, "but 2% live!"

A year after her diagnosis Cathy Jo asked me to take her bra shopping as her bras were too tight and causing a pain in her left side. That's when the doctors found a second tumor in the lung.

Shortly thereafter, Cathy Jo's oncologist told us that he wanted to introduce us to hospice so we would feel comfortable with them before it became an emergency. When we left the hospital, I was numb. "My God, this is the first time he didn't offer another treatment; he didn't pull a rabbit out of his hat," I thought in disbelief.

I became a split personality. I presented one face to Cathy, and another to the rest of my family. I would cry in front of my daughter, but was never out of control in front of her or my two sons. I knew I had to be strong for them.

On many occasions, Cathy Jo would reassure her me and tell her me she would be okay. One time she called to my husband, "Dad, you had better come in here, your wife is having a nervous breakdown and she can use a little TLC."

Almost two years to the day of my daughter's diagnosis, I knew she was dying. The doctor had told me to remember that when it is time for her to die, do not call 911. The hospice people will come in due time. But there is no emergency.



Shortly after her 38<sup>th</sup> birthday, Cathy Jo died holding her brother's hands with us, her parents, by her side. It was very peaceful; we weren't frightened, we weren't afraid. I don't know how we knew what to do, but somehow we were doing what we needed to.

I was depressed for a long time after my daughter's death. I had low energy, couldn't sleep, and was walking around in a daze. Colors changed for a while, they weren't that vibrant. Cathy Jo was very vibrant.

A few years after Cathy Jo's death, I saw an ad in the Involvements Column in the newspaper. Our house, a grief support center, needed volunteers to co-lead grief support groups. I knew this was something I had to do. I went through the our house training program and began co-leading grief support groups.

Conducting the groups for parents who had a child die have always been the most fulfilling. It is entirely different than any other group. Parents, who have lost a child, feel they have lost their future. Many griever speak about their depression and tears being like waves in the ocean. They go to the supermarket and a wave will wash over them, they have to walk back to their car until their tears stop. I sometimes see myself in their faces. I remember the stage of not being able to stop crying. I remember it very well.

I get nourished being a group leader at our house. When someone dies, friends will often ask me, what do I do, what should I say? I tell them by standing with someone who has experienced a death, you are bearing witness, and you are sharing their grief with them.

There are times when I still feel numb. I know it's happened, I know she is gone. Sometimes, when I am on a nature walk, I pretend I am with her.

Memory can be a double-edged sword. I cherish my memories of the good times, but the painful memories of her illness and death never leave. As time goes on maybe her illness won't be so fresh to me. It's still very fresh.

To lose a child is horrifying. There is this emptiness, a physical hole in my body that can never be filled. Volunteering at our house helps fill that hole.

*our house is a grief support center providing grief support services, education, resources, and hope to the Los Angeles Community. We provide grief support groups at our two locations in West LA and Woodland Hills for children and teens who had a Mom or Dad die and for adults who have experienced the death of a spouse/partner, parent, sibling, or child. We also provide grief specific education for medical students at UCLA and USC and we conduct onsite grief support groups in schools throughout Los Angeles. Each year our house serves thousands of children, families, and adults.*



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