

Parents Who Are Now Childless

~excerpts~

The death of any child overwhelms that child's parents regardless of the cause of death or the age of the child. Parental grief is intense, long-lasting and complex

When a parent faces the death of any only child or the death of the last child or children, bereavement is compounded by additional issues that ultimately must be resolved if healing is to occur.

Now Childless

Suddenly we are childless. The new and total silence in our lives is unbroken. The lack of surviving children is but one additional heartbreaking issue that initially deepens our devastation.

However our children have died, the joy we knew in sharing their lives is forever gone. Our world feels abruptly empty. We think that we stand alone. Many question the value of existence. These feelings may last for many months, even years, as we move through early bereavement.

Are We Still Parents?

We who are without surviving children find our own parental identity suddenly questioned because we no longer practice parenting. Ultimately, however, we realize that we are forever parents. The memories of our children and the love we shared with them live on as a part of us always

The Journey Through Grief

Do not postpone your grief nor walk too quickly through the pain of your forced goodbye. Sorrow will surely accompany you on this journey, but do not fear or reject it. It is as natural and normal as the night which follows day. Your emotions will resemble a turbulent roller coaster for a long time. You may find that tears respect neither time or place. Remember that tears release emotional pain and help to prevent physical ailments caused or exacerbated by stress.

You will find that laughter as well as tears are equally important in your recovery. Although you will need time to genuinely enjoy yourself again, you need not feel guilty about expressing either emotion. Try to accept such relief when it occurs.

You may find joy in commemorating your child's life by sharing it with others. You will rediscover a greater depth of joy and laughter, finding once more that your life with your departed son or daughter held far more happiness than sorrow. Others who have not experienced the death of their children cannot know or even imagine what you are enduring. To explain to these persons that your feelings are real and appropriate can be beneficial both to them and to you.

You may wish to surround yourself with others who have experienced the pain of a child's death. Locate a Compassionate Friends' Chapter or other support group that you can attend regularly. Although most parents who have surviving children

cannot understand the full dimensions of your situation, you will quickly see that every child's death is the end of a unique only child. Other bereaved parents will understand your pain, your emptiness. With them, you can approach a new future to replace the one you have lost.



How Many Children Do You Have?

Bereaved parents find it difficult to answer the question, "How many children do you have?" Some wish to honor their children's by acknowledging their lives and answering, "I had one child," or "I had two children." Others are more comfortable answering, "None." You may find that your answer changes as your needs change. The key is to be prepared to say what you want to say at the moment.

As we mourn our great losses, some family members and friends urge us to concentrate on what we have left. Since we often feel that we have nothing left, we may resent these urgings. At these times it is important to remember that our family and friends want to alleviate our suffering. They want to see us whole once more. Nevertheless, healing will take considerable time before we see with clarity just what we do have left.

Memories

Do not be afraid to keep the memories of your child alive. It is possible to take mementos of the past and make them a part of today and tomorrow. You may find it comforting to wear some article of clothing or a favorite piece of jewelry that your child once wore. You might choose bits and pieces that were a part of your child's life and make a collage or a quilt to hang in your home. Even a favorite toy on a shelf is a way to ensure that your child's memory is a tangible presence in your daily life.

Reinvestment

One of the most demanding challenges we face is to refocus our lives. In general we often find it difficult to see anything beyond unrelenting despair.

Gradually, however, we find new friends and our lives begin to inch forward. Old friends who have been unable to bear misfortune with us often take lesser roles in our lives. Reinvestment is difficult as we reevaluate our current lives and resolve to recover from our losses. At this point the grief intensity lessens, and many of us resolve to live the remainder of our lives in a way that will commemorate our children's lives. Many others strive to accomplish those things their children might have tried to do if time and life had afforded them the chance,

Most of us want to do something constructive in memory of our sons or daughters. Many of us have established memorial funds, created scholarships and planted trees.

Someday, which differs from parent to parent, you will recognize that you are certainly making progress in your journey through grief. Then you will have the opportunity to reinvest in a world in which your child's life and death have indeed made a difference.

