

Grief as an individual and how you grieve may depend upon your culture, past experiences and traditions. You may find yourself experiencing feelings, thoughts, behaviors and even physical problems that you have never had before. Everyone grieves in a different way and for varying lengths of time. It is important to understand that what you feel is natural. Try to be patient, allow your feelings to come and go, take care of yourself and seek support from family, friends and professionals if needed. Giving yourself permission to mourn will promote recovery and well-being during this time.

The Grief Experience

Though grief is very personal and individual, there are common reactions that are related to the grief process. Noted psychiatrist John Bowlby has presented the following information on grief, saying there is movement back and forth between these experiences. You may also experience many of these feelings together at different points in time.

Emotions

Your emotions may also move in stages similar to these noted below:

Numbness or Protest

You may have been overcome by a sense of numbness upon the loss of your child or you may have protested your child's death; this reaction may have been characterized by mental and physical signs of stress.

Searching and Yearning

You may find yourself completely preoccupied with your child and seeking any and all reminders. During this time, you may treasure your child's mementos, photographs, a lock of hair, birth record, footprints, blankets and or clothing.

Disorganization and Despair

During this time, you may begin to recognize the loss of your child. You may feel helpless and begin to withdraw from others.

Reorganization

At this time, your grief may begin to recede; you may find that your life has changed and you have adopted new patterns of living.

Disbelief and Denial

No one expects a child to die. Initially there may be shock and numbness or a feeling of unreality. The death of a child seems to go against the fundamental order of nature. Your first thought may be "this isn't happening" or "there must be some mistake." This emotional numbness protects the mind and allows for a slow acceptance of reality.

Guilt and Self Blame

The deep sorrow you may feel may be accompanied by feelings of guilt. Some parents blame themselves for things they did or did not do. Guilt is also a very normal response to a traumatic event. It is a way to process what has happened in an effort to make sense of something that makes no sense.

Anger and Helplessness

It is not uncommon to feel angry as the full impact of what has happened becomes clear. You may feel anger towards your child's doctor, hospital staff, your partner or other family members. Anger is often a response to your feelings of helplessness in the situation. You may question your religious beliefs, culture and traditions. You may also find yourself withdrawing from friends and family.

Envy and Resentment

As you mourn your child, you may see reminders of your loss everywhere. You may feel anger, envy or resentment towards other parents. These are normal reactions.

Loneliness and Yearning

You may experience a broad range of emotions, including a strange sense of loneliness even when you are surrounded by family and friends. The yearning you feel may cause you to dream about your child and you may even hear his or her voice. You may be preoccupied, confused or uncertain. While these feelings are natural, it may be helpful to share them with other members of your family and your friends.

Physical Symptoms

Sometimes your emotions can affect how your body feels, especially during a time of crisis. Your body can experience a range of physical symptoms, most of which are perfectly normal responses to grief. For instance, your arms may ache to hold your child. Some other common physical symptoms include:

- Sleep disturbance / dreams
- Weight and appetite changes
- Weakness and fatigue
- Decreased resistance to illness
- Restlessness / anxiety
- Shortness of breath
- Rapid heartbeat
- Tightness in your chest or throat
- Disorientation
- Forgetfulness
- Difficulty concentrating
- Sensitivity to noise
- Dry mouth

The physical and emotional expressions of your grief will diminish over time, especially if you allow yourself to feel and express your emotions and take this time that you need to grieve. If physical symptoms persist or you feel that your grief is affecting your health, we encourage you to speak with your healthcare provider.

Grieving as a Family

Grieving is both a personal experience and one shared with partners, children and extended family. Each person will have their own way of reacting to grief and might not be able to fully support each other. Below are some important aspects of grieving as a family.

Open Communication

Often, partners want to protect each other, as well as their other children, from the intense emotions of grief. This has been shown to increase and prolong both partners' grief experiences. Talking about your child and the feelings of grief with partners, children and other family members has been shown to help families cope with their grief.

Allowing Individual Grief Experiences

Often, we expect our partners, children and others to feel and act a certain way after a death. Crying, sadness and other outward expressions of grief will be different in each member of a family. There may be a belief that how others in the family feel or act may mean that they didn't care about the deceased child as much as others, or that they are "over" the death. Clarifying how your family members are feeling will help you to avoid making assumptions and better understand how each is processing grief.

Finding Time Together Outside of the Grief

While it may feel cruel, life continues in the face of devastating loss. Finding time together to enjoy an activity will help you maintain important connections to each other while acknowledging the absence of your deceased child.