



Written by Carol Schoneberg
Bereavement Services

Grief is Not a Competition

No death is ever easy. If you love someone and they die, you cannot escape grief. “Which loss is worse—the death of a child or the death of a spouse?” is a question that sometimes comes up in a bereavement support group. A person might diminish their own deeply-felt grief because they think someone else’s loss is worse—as if they have no right to feel what they feel. Each person’s response to the death of a loved one is his or her own unique expression of grief, and should not have to be justified. Only the griever knows the depth of what they are feeling and its impact on their life. Grief is not a game of one-upmanship or something that needs to be defended.

The Death of a Child

The death of a child is like no other loss—it is unique and incomparable in its complexities and impact. The loss affects the whole family.

A mother who lost her adult son once told me, “I’ve lost both of my parents, my husband, and two of my siblings. Each death was terrible and each grief was unbearably painful...but the death of my son and the grief that followed was unlike anything I have ever known.” The death of a child of any age is a death out of sequence, one that is not supposed to happen. I have not met a grieving parent who has not told me they would gladly change places with their child if they could. Their hopes and dreams for the future have been irrevocably shattered, leaving them feeling robbed, heartbroken, and inconsolable. A part of them has died.

*The death of a child is a death of the future;
The death of a parent is a death of the past;
The death of a spouse is the death of the present.”*

Earl A. Grollman

The Death of a Spouse

The death of a spouse is like no other loss—it is unique and incomparable in its complexities and impact. The loss affects the whole family. For deeply connected couples, the death of a spouse is one of the greatest losses possible. A man whose beloved wife died told me he had never known such profound sadness and loneliness, feeling certain he couldn’t go on living without her. Since her death, he found himself with an aching emptiness, a feeling of despair, and fear of the future. Once confident in his ability to make good decisions, he now was second-guessing everything he did. “Nothing has changed my life more than her death.” His hopes and dreams for the future have been irrevocably shattered, leaving him feeling robbed, heartbroken, and inconsolable. A part of him has died. Daring to love takes courage, knowing there will be pain when death comes. Each death we experience is unique, and our grief will mirror the depth of our love and connection to the one who died, regardless of who died. Making a commitment to eventual healing, you honor your loved one and yourself.

Don't Flush the Goldfish: When Children Grieve

Written by Child Psychologist Audrey Stempel, PhD

Children, like adults, grieve in many ways. However, often their grief is disguised. They may appear sullen or grouchy, irritable, easily frustrated, clingy, snippy, moody, scared about things they have never been scared of before, worried when you leave the house, not want to go to school, have meltdowns more easily, and be just plain sad. Their schoolwork may begin to suffer, their concentration (much like adults) is not as good, they may be more easily distracted, have difficulty organizing their time, seem more confused and forgetful, or maybe just the opposite. They may not show any emotion and just hide their emotions by immersing themselves in their schoolwork, their sports, or other distracting hobbies. They may want to talk about it a lot, or they may not want to talk about it at all.

Their emotional response will have a lot to do with their previous death experiences. But remember, that children are emotional beings, much less logical than adults (as if in grief, adults are at all logical, just imagine a child!) Their emotional outbursts may seem severe and out of character. I like to call that the "pin the tail on the donkey" syndrome. They don't know what they are upset about, so they find something to blame it on, when in reality, they are expressing their grief.

Many children are in touch with the "spiritual" world,

so don't be surprised if they dream about their loved one and tell you about the visits they have had.

Validate their reality, even if you don't believe.

Give them time to talk, but don't make them. Set aside a time to talk and invite a conversation. Don't ask "How are you doing?" You know you don't like to hear that and neither do they. Don't ask a question, make a statement to invite a conversation. "This is the time I have set aside to talk. Tell me if there is anything on your mind."

Death may seem unreal to a child. They may not understand the impermanence of life and the permanence of death. It is important to respect all death, be it a goldfish, a pet mouse, a cat, a dog, a great grandfather, a great aunt, and so on. All death is an experience to be respected.

Don't be ashamed to express your own grief. They may worry that you are sad and if you are, let them know. This gives them permission to be sad as well. I once told a teenager to "celebrate her sadness." She was confused by the statement, but I told her to give her sadness as much attention and energy as she gives her joy. I told her to find a meaningful way for her to express her grief, be it by releasing balloons, or sending a paper boat up the river, writing a letter, throwing flowers in the ocean, drawing, or walking and singing. Remember, we each grieve in our own way and children are no different in that. Be kind and gentle and watch the "shoulds." As with you, there is no time limit to grief and no right way to grieve.

Hospice of Southern Maine is grateful to have been able to provide care to your loved one and your family. As your healing journey continues, we hope you won't hesitate to contact us if you would like further information or support. (207) 289-3640 or visit our website at www.hospiceofsouthernmaine.org

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