

When your only child dies



How is grief different when your only child dies?

Parents have told us that the grief for a child is no different if they are your only child. However, they say that it comes with other losses. These include grief for the loss of the future including grandchildren, carrying out your parental role and being overwhelmed with the question, 'Am I still a mum or dad?' Life changes beyond recognition: the home is quiet; the focus of life is different; you wonder who will inherit your precious belongings; who will be there in your old age? These are all thoughts that bereaved parents of an only child have. One parent said, 'My arms are empty and completely aware of what is missing. My son's life, my heart, and soul make me a parent, but my arms are always empty'.



Am I still a parent?

Parents say they hold on to the fact that once you have been a parent you will always be one. You know that your love for your child or children (whether babies or adults) will never go away and is part of who you are as a parent. Answering the question 'Do you have children?' is always different for bereaved parents but even more poignant for parents whose only child has died. There is no right or wrong answer to this - saying what feels comfortable for you at the time is the right answer. Parents tell us that ultimately you come to an understanding and belief that you will always be the parent of your child who has died and find ways to continue to feel a bond with your child.



What do I do now?

This is a very common question for bereaved parents. Life has been orientated around the care of your child and it is therefore hard to know 'what to do'. It may be difficult to be with others who have children, but this can also be a comfort. You may think that you have 'nothing to live for'. It is important to share these feelings with your GP and it could be that counselling will provide further support for you. A parent said, 'Counselling gave me the space to say how I really feel and having said that, I didn't feel so distressed and alone anymore'.



Looking to the future

Events such as birthdays, anniversaries, Christmas etc. can be particularly painful without children. It is possible to find ways to cope with these days. Some parents choose to go away or develop routines and rituals in memory of their child on those days such as letting a balloon go, lighting a candle, eating their child's favourite foods etc. Parents often talk about finding a new meaning to life. This could be through a job, charity work in your child's name or fulfilling dreams you may have had for your child.



Future children

Some parents are unable to have further children or may choose not to. However, for some parents, there is a longing to have further children. This important decision can bring anxiety about the health of a future child and a concern that others may think you will be 'alright' now that you are planning to have more children. Parents have told us of the importance of helping subsequent children understand and know about their sibling who died and may put a memory box together or photo album for subsequent children to keep.



Meeting other bereaved parents

Bereaved parents often find comfort in meeting others in a similar situation. Sometimes it can be hard to meet other bereaved parents who have surviving children as their experience can be different. Please see below for specific support.

These organisations might be able to offer further information and support:

The Compassionate Friends

Support for bereaved parents with a helpline resources and groups for parents.

www.tcf.org.uk

0345 123 2304

Compassionate Friends have a newsletter and online group specifically for childless parents that can be accessed via the website.

The Child Death Helpline

Support for those affected by the death of a child, whether family, friends, or professionals.

Staffed by bereaved parents and supervised by trained counsellors.

www.childdeathhelpline.org.uk

0800 282 986 or 0808 800 6019

Cruse

Information, help and support for anyone bereaved via a helpline, individual sessions and group support.

www.cruse.org.uk/

0808 808 1677

If you would like further advice or to hear about other organisations that can help you, please call our Family Support Line on 01483 230974 or email: familysupport@shootingstar.org.uk