

When your stepchild dies



How is grief different when your stepchild dies?

Accept that you need to mourn and express your grief following the death of your stepchild. Set aside time for grief to flow through you, you may find relief in releasing emotions, moving your body, solving problems or accomplishing meaningful tasks. Respect your own unique needs to help determine what you need to get through your grief. You may find that some people may not acknowledge your grief and you may be overlooked in concern for the birth-parents welfare. This attitude is hurtful and can leave you feeling like an outsider in your own family.

Your feelings are important, and just as you have loved and cared for your stepchild, you may feel grief and loss at their death.



Emotions and feelings

The death of someone we love often evokes past losses and each person's individual grief will be affected by their own experiences. Have realistic expectations about grief, maybe try to view grief as a complex process that has no deadlines, but mainly waves and unpredictable ups and downs, which eventually brings a sense of healing that creeps up after many months or several years.

Your partner may have thought about feelings of loss relating to the end of the previous relationships that were resolved, but now finds that painful issues are re-emerging, particularly so if he or she was widowed. It may be that your partner has lost his or her only child, whereas you have surviving children; this can bring complicated guilt feelings, particularly for long-term stepparents. You may find you are experiencing mixed feelings towards the child who died when you see how your partner and others in the family are suffering. Or you may regret that your relationship with the stepchild was not as close as you would have wished. It might be that the child may have rejected you, despite your continuing care. It might help to acknowledge these feelings and talk to others you trust, or by writing them down perhaps in the form of a diary or a letter which no one needs to see, and which you don't need to keep forever.

These difficulties may cause painful rifts in relationships as you struggle to adjust to your stepchild's death.



What do I do now?

Even though you may feel isolated at times, particularly if you have joined the family recently, you are also in a unique position to be a positive, practical and an emotional help within the household. However, while you are helping others in the family, remember that you too need support perhaps from a friend or colleague who will allow you to talk about all that is going on. Sometimes reading about parental grief can be of help and value to help you understand you and your partners feelings. You may want to consider contacting one of our counsellors to talk through any emotions and feelings you have and get emotional support. Processing memories and telling your story can help your grief flow.



Hope for the future

For step-parents, the grief experience may be a precarious journey as you try to balance the needs of your partner, your own feelings and the other family relationships. Events such as birthdays, anniversaries, Christmas etc. can be particularly painful without your stepchild. 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 stepchild on those days such as letting a balloon go, lighting a candle, eating their stepchild's favourite foods etc. Parents often talk about finding a new meaning to life. This could be through a job, charity work in your stepchild's name or fulfilling dreams you may have had for your stepchild.



Meeting other bereaved parents

Bereaved parents often find comfort in meeting others in a similar situation. We hold events at Shooting Star Children's Hospices that allow for the opportunity to meet with other bereaved parents.

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