

Grief After a Child Dies

**You're not alone.
We're here to listen.**
There is no timeline for grief. Knowing there are supports and resources available can give hope as you move through your grief.

External Factors Include:

- Age of your child
- Circumstances surrounding the death of your child
- Nature of the relationship you had with your child
- Nature of supportive or trusted individuals you are connected to
- If you have more than one child and the ages of your other children
- Number of losses you have already experienced

Internal Factors Include:

- **Age and gender:** Inevitably, you will have more experiences with death as you age. You may experience gender-stereotyped responses from others within your communities. Stereotypes can present as outdated expectations for “how you should” grieve based solely on age and gender.
- **Your cultural background, religious, spiritual, or family beliefs and values:** Your cultural practices, upbringing, and the belief system you have cultivated throughout the years can impact your grief journey and mourning practices. You are engaging in healthy grieving by allowing yourself to express your feelings and talk openly about your child's death.
- **Your coping style before the loss:** The development of coping styles begins in early childhood and develops through your experiences with stress. Coping styles can either be:
 - **Active (effective)** – problem-solving, emotion recognition, and processing (accessing support).
 - **Avoidant (ineffective)** – short-term relief and may have negative long-term consequences (substance use, denial, self-blame).

The death of a child at any age complicates grief for parents and caregivers. This loss is considered “out of the natural order of things,” as we expect that we will be able to watch children grow, develop, and complete anticipated life milestones.

What is complicated grief?
In cases where complicated grief is experienced, the initial intensity remains consistent, slowing or halting a person's healing.

In these situations, individuals experience intense grief for longer than 6 months after the death of their loved one or experience extreme difficulties with day-to-day functioning, which negatively impacts their health and/or safety.



Grief Responses

Emotional Distress

You may find that the level of distress is like no other experienced before and past coping styles do not feel as effective, and need to be adjusted to meet your emotional need(s). Even though emotions may cause distress, feel overwhelming and be unexpected at times, they serve an essential purpose during grief. Emotions provide information, giving you a better understanding of where you are in your healing, specifically what you need at certain moments during your grief process. It is important to remember that “there is no set timeframe for this intense period of loss” (K. Doka 2016).

What can occur:

Shock and Numbness are typical emotional responses experienced after the death of a child. These emotions naturally occur as the feelings and pain connected to loss would be too overwhelming to process all at once; however, they will subside over time. It is important to remember that these emotions work “like anesthesia; they help you to survive the pain of early grief” (A. Wolfelt, 2005).

Sadness, Longing, and Yearning for your child may feel like it will last forever. The first step in dealing with the intensity of feelings is to give yourself permission to acknowledge that they are occurring and experience these emotions in “doses” instead of attempting to avoid them. Although painful, these emotions are a natural part of grieving, mourning, and healing.

Anger plays a vital role at different times during grief. It is a secondary emotion that provides a sense of control in a world that feels uncontrollable; it is also about protesting what has happened and protesting against injustice. Anger also enhances motivation in the moment, pushing you to complete tasks, reducing and/or providing a break from feeling depressed or helpless.

Guilt may also occur and does not need to be rational to be experienced. “You are trying to make meaning of something tragic and painful. Guilt arises from a vulnerable self-critical point of view and feelings of helplessness in not being able to change things then or now” (Squamish Hospice).

Doka, K. J. (2016). When a child Dies. In *Grief is a journey: finding your path through loss* (pp. 125–149). essay, Atria Books.

Doka, K. J., & Redmond, L. M. (1996). In *Living with grief after sudden loss: Suicide, homicide, accident, heart attack, stroke* (pp. 53–71). essay, Hospice Foundation of America.

Squamish Hospice Society. (n.d.). *A Guide to Understanding Your Emotions When You Are Grieving*. Squamish, BC; Squamish Community Foundation.

Wolfelt, A. (2002). *Healing a parent's grieving heart: 100 practical ideas after your child dies*. Companion Press.

Wolfelt, A. D. (2016, December 15). *Helping Yourself Heal When Your Child Dies*. Center for Loss & Life Transition. <https://www.centerforloss.com/>



Strategies To Support Healthy Grieving & Mourning (A. Wolfelt, 2005)

Be kind to yourself and be okay with saying “no”, when necessary.

Find ways to continue your relationship with your child. Allow yourself to reflect on your memories, speak their name, look through pictures, tell stories of your child, and ask others to share their memories with you.

Talk to your child, use their name, keep them involved in holidays and special occasions, and plan how you will acknowledge the anniversary of their death.

Make use of linking objects. This includes any items that are meaningful to you, bring comfort, and connect you to your child. Examples of linking objects include: photos, stuffed animals/toys, clothing or jewelry, or doing things like making a favourite meal or listening to a favourite song.

Grieve as a family. Talk about the differences in your grief and listen to each other, without judgment.

Make time to connect/reconnect with your spouse/partner and your surviving children.

Ask for support and/or allow for help. You have the right to identify what you need in the moment, as well as when you require solitude or privacy.

Tell your story of grief. Identify those within your natural support system who are helpful and you feel you can reach out to. Also, think about engaging in grief-focused therapy or connecting with loss specific support groups.