

*Supporting parents after bereavement*

# Milestones and challenges

*What helped us...*

# Milestones and challenges

*“To be honest, in the early days of my loss it was a challenge to get out of the bed, shower and function as a mother. As time passed I got into a routine that helped me, in particular on the really hard days.”*  
*Bereaved Mum*

## A journey of change

The death of our child changes our lives forever bringing us on a journey of change. Along this journey, coping with our grief will carry its own particular challenges, especially at key milestones. These come in different guises: from the more obvious to the ones that sneak up and catch us when we least expect it.

Milestones can happen at any time and continue for many years after our child has died. Milestones are significant achievements or markers your child should have made if they were still alive. They may mark dates that only you as a parent remember.

They could include:

- first communion;
- first day in secondary school;
- graduation;

- 21st birthday;
- 30th birthday; and

Other occasions when their peers are celebrating and our child is absent, such as weddings and births.

## Challenging special occasions

*“My son should have been graduating from college this year, all his friends are... when the day came I honoured my son with my own ritual that helped me through.”*

*“I would dread the birthdays and anniversary for weeks and weeks, worrying about what I would do to mark it. The day when it arrived was tough, but not as bad as I had imagined it! Somehow we find the strength to get through them.”*

Challenges can range from the first birthday to family events when your child is no longer present. The first Christmas, Easter and Halloween are big family occasions and painful reminders that someone special is missing.

### **Birthdays**

Birthdays are very difficult. A day that brought so much joy when they were born, now serves as a painful reminder of what we and they are missing. As time passes not every family member will have the same feelings on that day.

Our own birthdays and those of surviving family members can often be a reminder of the one that is missing.

*"The first year after my daughter died I dreaded every birthday and special occasion, I just wanted them to go away. As time has passed I have learnt to mark these occasions in my own way – for her birthday we go out to dinner as a family. For our birthdays there is always a special candle lit in her memory at the celebrations."*

### **Your child's birthday**

Your child's birthday will always be a significant day for you. Talk about the date with other family members or friends, mark it in some small way that is meaningful to you.

Remind those who may not know the date, so they may support you more at this time. Some parents make a birthday card and birthday cake. You could also ask other members of the family to help you with this. You can mark the day with

something that reflects what your loved one meant to each of you.

*"I really missed not giving my daughter a birthday gift, until someone suggested planting a shrub in the garden in her memory, I have done that for the last eight years and now have this special place in my garden where I can remember her every day of the year."*

### **Pain of everyday reminders**

Challenges can also include:

- revisiting a special place;
- hearing a special song on the radio;
- seeing someone who looks so like them on the street; and
- the change of seasons marking the passing of time.

It is also challenging to meet their friends as they continue on with their lives, leaving you to wonder what they might be like now...?

*"I thought I was doing ok, then out of the blue something would ambush me and leave me feeling as bad as the day he died. After speaking to other bereaved dads I realised this was normal and slowly learnt how to anticipate and manage the ambushes."*

### **The first anniversary**

The first anniversary of our child's death is a huge milestone. Initially some extended family members and friends will remember the date. As time goes by it is still a milestone, even though it can become a date only you and close family will remember.

Planning something to mark the date can help. This could be:

- a religious service;
- a visit to a special place;
- releasing a balloon; or
- planting a shrub or a tree in your child's memory.

Just as grief is different for everyone, we cope differently with the varying challenges and milestones we meet along our journey. Sometimes parents feel they have been 'knocked back' to the early days of their loss when a significant event or milestone reopens the wounds of grief. This can leave them feeling overwhelmed.

This is a normal and a natural part of our journey. In time, each of us will find our own coping mechanism to work our way through the challenge or milestone.

### **Don't worry about what others think**

We should not be influenced about what others think or what we imagine they expect of us. We must do what is comfortable for us while also taking into account the needs and views of our immediate family.

Sometimes reaching a consensus is not easy. Maybe you can explain how you are feeling and get them to do the same and then reach a compromise together.

For each milestone and challenge, we learn how to build resilience for the next one, to experience what helped us through, and what did not.

### **Other family events**

Family events are exhausting in the early years. It is good to listen to yourself and your body. If you become tired, then rest. If you need to go home from an event, that's okay.

If it's a family communion or wedding, you may want to just go to the service and not attend the celebrations afterwards. You will know your energy levels and what you are able to cope with.

### **What has helped parents and families at Christmas**

Christmas is a special time for families and such a painful reminder of who is missing. Some parents struggle with putting up a Christmas tree in the early years. Yet if you have surviving children, you may need to consider how that would make them feel?

Unfortunately, Christmas will come and go every year. Some families, because they find the old rituals too hard, create new rituals to help them through this difficult time.

### **Shopping**

If you are struggling with the shopping element of Christmas, ask someone to do it for you, or go online. It's a great way to avoid the crowds and Christmas music!

# Supporting parents after bereavement

## Cards

It is okay not to send Christmas cards. If you don't feel like writing cards, an alternative might be to write one letter, have it copied and send it out. Some families will buy a gift in their child's memory and donate it to a children's charity at Christmas time.

## Venue

Where will you have Christmas the first year? Will it be the same place as usual or do you want to do something different? You could have Christmas dinner with people you feel comfortable with and who don't have any expectations of you to celebrate the day!

## Including your child at Christmas

Make your own Christmas wreath or Christmas candle in memory of your child.

## Ceremonies

There are many remembrance and 'celebration of life' events on at this time of year. If you attend one, it will bring you in contact with others who also feel lonely and sad at Christmas.

*"Three years after my son died I decided I wanted to send Christmas cards, but how would I sign them? I did not want to leave his name off them so I didn't. I signed them with our names and 'remembering John with love'. It made him part of our Christmas again."*

## Practical tips to cope with the challenges

### Make a plan: Decide what you can handle

Be honest about your feelings and how you want to spend that day. Decide how much celebrating you are comfortable with and can handle. Surround yourself with people who wish to support you in what you need.

### Change traditions if it's helpful

Make changes if needs be. If you wish to continue with family traditions, do; if you wish to make changes, that is okay too. Perhaps visit friends or relatives for a milestone event instead of entertaining others.

### Remember your child in a special way

Perhaps you could light a candle beside a photograph of your child. If you find comfort in it, look back at old photographs.

### Plant a shrub or tree

For other special occasions, Communion, Confirmation, graduations and family weddings, you could mark the occasion by planting a tree in their memory.

### Try to be positive

Remember, as time passes, you are allowed to experience happiness and joy. You are not being disrespectful to your child by having these feelings.

Anam Cara is an all-Ireland organisation providing online and face-to-face peer support services to bereaved parents. The death of a child of any age and through any circumstances is devastating.

Everyone in the family will deal differently with their grief and may need different types of support. Initially that support will be your extended family, friends or a professional.

However, as time passes, know that groups like Anam Cara are available to provide a safe and comfortable place for you to access information and speak to other bereaved parents.

Visit our website to view the Anam Cara Information Videos, with bereaved parents interviewed on themes such as 'A Dad's Grief' and 'The Grieving Family'.

We would like to thank the parents associated with Anam Cara North Dublin for their contribution to this leaflet.



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