

Supporting parents after bereavement

COPING WITH THE SUDDEN DEATH OF YOUR CHILD

What helped us...

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“It was like being in a dense fog, I was looking from afar at everyone getting on with their lives. I could not cry, and then when the fog started to lift I could not stop crying. I thought I was losing my mind.” Bereaved Mum

Sudden death

When the death of your child comes without warning, the shock and disbelief can be overwhelming. You have had no opportunity to prepare, to say good-bye, to resolve misunderstandings, to tell them you love them or to prevent what has happened.

The intensity of your grief can be suffocating. The early days and weeks are like being in the most horrific nightmare. It takes time for the reality of what has happened to sink in. The constant questioning of ‘what ifs?’ and ‘if onlys’ are normal, however, they can make you think that you are going mad.

The sense of utter helplessness that you cannot change what has happened to your child may add to your grief.

What is grief?

- Grief is a normal reaction to loss.
- There is no correct way to grieve; we do it in our own way and in our own time.
- Intense emotions and thoughts are part of grief... they will change

Grief can also affect you physically. After a sudden or traumatic death you might find it hard to sleep, have nightmares, lose your appetite or become ill. If these persist or you are worried about them, talk to your GP or talk to a bereavement professional.

Feelings

Painful intrusive thoughts such as regret, anger, fear, can leave us feeling that no one understands.

It is not unusual to feel:

- tired,
- numb,
- irritable,
- angry,
- guilty,
- lonely,
- anguished,
- helpless,
- frightened,
- envious,
- unable to concentrate.

No matter how you are feeling, it is helpful to talk about them.

“The sense of loneliness even in a room full of people – I just wanted her back with me, with her family.”

You might be hypersensitive to others’ comments or gestures and you may often feel hurt by their lack of understanding. Sometimes you might feel overwhelmed by these feelings, however, they are normal responses to the intense grief parents experience after the death of a child.

Some parents talk about being restless, others lose all interest in life and just don’t want to go anywhere or do anything. Our confidence is shattered. We wonder: “Who are we now when our child has died?”

It is important to remember that you are not going mad; you have experienced the loss of one of the most precious people in your life, your child.

Shock

This is often the body’s first response to news of a sudden death. The reality of what has happened is too much to take in. Shock is often nature’s way of helping us through the early days and weeks. It allows the sudden death of our child to slowly become a reality.

“I could not believe it. This happens to other people. I was distraught. My son could not have died so suddenly. Then the autopilot kicked in.”

Guilt and anger are two possible reactions after the sudden death of our son or daughter.

Guilt

As parents we feel our role is to protect our child. But we find ourselves helpless and unable to change what has happened. The ‘what ifs?’, ‘why didn’t I?’, and ‘if onlys’ are natural, and can lead to self-blame for a period of time. No matter how irrational these feelings are, it is helpful to talk about them, sharing with family, friends or other bereaved parents who you feel comfortable talking to.

Anger

Sometimes it is easier for us to be angry than sad. Our anger may be directed at: those responsible; the world at large; our child; or ourselves. It is okay to talk about

your anger and work your way through it. But we have to take care to avoid getting stuck in these feelings.

Trauma

A sudden traumatic death of a loved one can sometimes make us feel fearful and anxious. We can easily startle, worry constantly and no longer feel safe. If these feelings persist with disturbing or distressing memories or thoughts intruding into your sleep or daily thoughts, it would be important to talk to your GP or a professional. They will understand traumatic loss and the effects it can have on those left behind.

What may help

You have had a terrible shock:

- be kind and gentle with yourself;
- accept any support offered from family and friends; and
- allow yourself to cry and talk about your child and your loss.

At first there will be many tough days. Try to cope with one day at a time rather than thinking too far ahead.

Try to get some fresh air. Some gentle exercise helps clear the head, and nature can help us heal.

Look after your health

Eat healthy food

- Get enough rest and sleep
- See the 'Health and Nutrition' section on anamcara.ie

Talk

Find people who you can talk to, who are comfortable with you and will let you tell your story again and again without trying to fix you.

Do something that helps

Find what helps you cope through the day, for example:

- writing,
- gardening,
- walking, or
- art.

Keeping a journal can help you record your feelings and allow you to say the things you want to say to your child.

Rituals to remember

Rituals can be very helpful and can be an important part of our grieving process.

What some parents found unhelpful

Self-preservation is key. Don't put yourself through anything you don't feel able for. Always go with your gut feeling.

Negative people

Most people mean well but some can seem negative or unhelpful. If someone close to you is negative or unhelpful and sometimes takes away your energy, it is best not to spend time with them if you can, until you are stronger.

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Alcohol and drugs

Drinking alcohol or taking recreational drugs, although tempting, can make your grief harder to cope with.

Withdrawing

Withdrawing from society can make you feel even lonelier.

Excessive worry

Excessive worry and anxiety about upcoming formalities after a sudden death like post-mortems or the coroner's inquests is difficult to avoid. Talk to others about your fears.

Passing of time

Every family member's grief is as unique as their fingerprints and they journey through their loss at different speeds. As bereaved parents, we can slowly put our lives back together again.

"I had two choices after my daughter's tragic accident: I could let my sadness define me for the rest of my life, or I could choose to try and work through my pain and live my life in her memory. I knew what she would want me to do."

After the sudden death of our child our 'normal' is gone. However, we can find a 'new normal', a way to live our lives well in the absence of our son's or daughter's physical presence.

Many parents say that the grief slowly changes from intense pain and despair around the death event to warmer memories of a life lived and a commitment to live their life in honour of their child, whose life was cut short without warning.

Meeting other bereaved parents

Anam Cara brings bereaved parents together in a safe and comfortable place. It allows us to meet other parents who understand the challenges and milestones on our journey through grief and loss. Our services are free. Our groups are open to all parents, regardless of the age of their child or the circumstances of death.

Anam Cara is an 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. These involve interviews with bereaved parents, and include a video on 'Sudden and Traumatic Death'. We would like to thank the parents associated with Anam Cara for their contribution to this leaflet.



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