

Supporting parents after bereavement

# A MOTHER'S GRIEF



*What helped us...*

# A MOTHER'S GRIEF

***“I feel out of control. My emotions are all over the place - one minute I’m okay, the next minute I’m in tears.”***

## Mother and child

It is not the natural order of life for a child to die before his or her parents. The intensity of our grief is equal to the love we shared with our child.

For mothers, the bond with our child may start at conception or when we first lay eyes on our precious child and imagining a future marking all the special milestones with them.

Then our precious child dies. Our lives are changed forever. Some parents describe it like a bomb exploding. It destroys the comfortable world we knew and replaces it with a strange world that we don't recognise and with no road maps to guide us through our pain, sadness and despair.

Whether our child was a newborn or a grown adult, they were not supposed to die before us.

## Why us?

No matter what the circumstances of our child's death, we will always wonder why him? Why her? Why us? Was there something I could have done to prevent this happening?

These questions are normal for bereaved mums, we are just trying to make some sense of what has happened to our family.

## Everyone grieves differently

The sense of grief and loss that follows the death of our child cannot be described in words. We long for our child's physical presence, the day-to-day caring for them. We also grieve for the future without them.

***“I felt robbed of all the special moments and milestones, we should have shared his graduation, 21st, wedding, grandchildren.”***

You may feel as if your partner or other family members don't understand your grief or are not grieving as you think they should. But, grief is unique to everyone – just like our DNA. There is no right or wrong way to grieve, no one size fits all. Each member of the family has a different relationship with the child who died and so will grieve differently.

In time, we each find our own way to cope and survive the early days, weeks, months of their loss.

## Supporting your family

***"No one told me that grief was so like fear." C.S. Lewis***

We can feel overwhelmed by what has happened and frightened of a future without our child in it.

Instinctively, as mothers we will put other family members' needs above our own. Running on autopilot we will focus on "keeping it together". It is good to have this focus, however, it is important to set time aside during the day to be with your grief.

The death of our child affects us emotionally, mentally and physically. The best way we can support our family is to make it a priority to look after ourselves.

## You are not alone

***"I remember looking out the window of our home, paralysed in time by my grief, seeing everyone going about their day-to-day business. How could they? My son is dead."***

The death of a child is probably the most isolating experience you will have. The loneliness - even when surrounded by family and friends - can consume us every waking moment.

We just want one thing - that is, our child back! Not being able to change what has happened to our family makes us feel powerless. This feeling can manifest itself in anger or guilt or sometimes envy at other families who have not experienced the death of a child.

These crazy thoughts can be frightening and intrusive.

Know that these feelings are normal and will go away in time. We just need to take care that we don't stay stuck or focussed on blaming ourselves or someone else for what has happened.

Many parents say that talking to other bereaved mums and dads helps them feel less alone. With other bereaved parents, we can take the mask off and show our grief, knowing they understand because they are on a similar journey.

Talking to other bereaved mums can be a relief because they can confirm that you are not 'going mad', and that others have travelled this journey and survived.

## What has helped other mums

- Taking it one day at a time. And, when the day is too much - one hour!
- Talking about what has happened and about your child
- Allowing the tears to flow lets the pain out
- Trying to get enough sleep and rest
- Finding someone who can sit, listen and not try to fix us
- Walking and being outdoors
- Reading books about grief
- Keeping a journal or a notebook to write down the 'mad' thoughts
- Planning a short break away to somewhere no one knows you
- Accepting the offers of help with school runs, dinner or shopping
- Meeting with other bereaved mums and dads
- Creating new rituals, around birthdays and special occasions
- Keeping our child's memory alive

## The weeks and months after the death of your son or daughter

Be kind and gentle with yourself, grief can leave you exhausted and listless.

Don't expect too much from yourself in the early weeks and months. Some days we feel stronger, better able to cope, only

to hear a song on the radio or see our child's favourite food in the local shop and be catapulted back into raw grief. Be patient – this phase of our grief will pass.

Everyday tasks can be challenging. Our concentration levels are low and making a decision can be difficult.

***"Chatting with my friend I would be mid-sentence and forget what we were talking about, I would just go blank!"***

***"Sometimes I could stand for five minutes in the local shop trying to decide to buy brown or white bread."***

Very gradually, there are days when we begin to feel a little stronger than we did. Our ability to deal with our grief builds as we learn what helps and what does not!

Extended family and friends are important, and they will want to help – sometimes not knowing how. You can guide them to what is helpful and what it not.

Don't try to fit into what you feel is expected of you, rather do what feels right for you.

Many bereaved mums talk about being hypersensitive to every word and gesture from others. So, when well-meaning people say unhelpful things,

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they hurt us and can make us feel angry about their lack of sensitivity. They don't mean to upset us, they just don't understand the intensity of the grief and the depth of our loss.

## Things other mums found unhelpful

- Isolating yourself from family and friends
- People who are negative and lack understanding – best to avoid them
- Keeping your emotions bottled up
- Comparing ourselves with other bereaved mums and thinking they are coping so much better. Everyone's journey is different
- Not asking for help when you need it
- Getting stuck in feelings of guilt, resentment or anger
- Relying on drugs or alcohol – the relief will only be temporary
- Avoiding our grief by constantly keeping busy
- Having no routine
- Making life changing decisions within the first year

## When to return to work

Deciding when to return to work will be different for everyone. Always go with your gut feeling. Some mums prefer the routine of work and with a supportive work environment will be able to return to work without it adding to their stress levels.

Others will take time out to regain their energy or return to work on a part-time basis until they feel stronger. Talk to your employer to see what will work for both of you.

## Will I always feel this way?

*"I still have a relationship with my son who died, it is just different to the relationship I have with my living children. I know I will carry him in my heart forever."*

Grief is our response to the absence of our child. It's a normal natural process that continues longer than society recognises.

Many bereaved mums will testify that although death ends the physical relationship with our child, it does not end the love we shared with them. That continues.

Know you are not alone. We learn that life has changed forever, the normal we knew is gone. However, in time we and our family can find a new normal.

We find a way to live our lives around the physical absence of our child, remembering them with love rather than the raw, intense pain of early grief.

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, with bereaved parents interviewed on themes such as 'The Grieving Family' and '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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