

Supporting parents after bereavement

SELF-CARE HOW IT CAN HELP



What helped us...

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“Working in the garden and going to the gym helped because I could push myself physically which in turn helped me to get some sleep.” Bereaved Dad

Be kind to yourself

Following the death of your child, you may have a wide range of physical and emotional reactions, and you will find coping with all of these challenging.

Self-care will help. Self-care is about looking after yourself, minding yourself and being kind to yourself.

Because so much else is going on, is something that you may neglect or even feel that you do not deserve. However, it is something that can be a great help in the healing process.

Often as parents we focus on other members of our immediate family, making sure they are okay. We often neglect our own physical and emotional needs.

Other bereaved parents in Anam Cara offer the following suggestions for self-

care. We hope that they may help to get you through each day.

Asking for and accepting help

In the early days, following the loss of a child, people around us feel helpless and often want to do something to show their support. Well-meaning family, friends and neighbours can be a good source of practical help. You may often hear: ‘If there is anything I can do...’ If you are comfortable accepting their help, the answer is ‘Yes’. Many parents at Anam Cara have found this assistance useful.

“It was a while before either of us could face the school run. We just felt that we couldn’t deal with all the other parents coming over to us, looking at us. Thankfully, a neighbour with kids in the school also brought ours each day. It was such a help until we felt that we could go back...”

"I hated going to the supermarket so much. Not having to buy my son's favourite breakfast cereal was like torture. My sister offered to do the shopping for a while. It gave me one less thing to think about..."

Getting enough sleep

Sleep is vital for your body and mind to function well. After the trauma of losing a child, your sleeping patterns may be disturbed. But while we may feel exhausted during the day and long to sleep, at night we can find ourselves lying awake. Our minds can race for hours on end – this leaves us feeling even more drained and unable to function well.

Everything can seem even more overwhelming when we are tired, so it is important to have a routine that will help you to sleep and/or rest.

Avoid introducing more health issues

It can be tempting to look for a quick fix in alcohol or prescription drugs, but this can harm us. Instead:

- try to incorporate more physical activity into your daily routine to tire yourself out
- make small changes to your diet to improve your energy levels. See the Health and Nutrition section at anamcara.ie; and
- ask your pharmacist about natural remedies to help you relax and sleep

Talk to your GP if you have any concerns about yourself or another family member.

Filling the time

We all grieve differently. In the first days and weeks we may be in shock, but function fairly well. However, we may find even the smallest of tasks too difficult.

As time passes, we slowly begin to really take in our loss and realise how much our lives have changed.

It is usual to feel many different emotions in a single day:

- shock,
- anger,
- despair,
- exhaustion,
- hopelessness or vulnerable
- envy
- guilt, or
- loneliness

Most of all we just desperately miss our child.

Because these feelings can pursue us relentlessly in the months after a bereavement, parents at Anam Cara have found that finding some activity to busy ourselves, even for a short time, can be helpful.

"After a while I discovered a love of gardening. I could spend time out there on my own but occupied. And, it helped to be watching the plants and flowers grow, to be minding them, feeding them and watering them. I imagine he can see them. It by no means takes away my loss but it gives me a focus to nurture and care for something."

"Walking and getting out into nature helped me to process everything that had happened. In the early months my head was always so preoccupied. But after a while I began to notice again the smallest of things: a newly formed snowdrop, or the sun shining through the trees. It gave me hope that things would not always be terrible and that it might be possible for me to enjoy life again."

"I started reading books for the first time in years and although my concentration was terrible, just having something to take my mind in another direction helped me switch off."

Reading books on grief may help you identify with the feelings you are experiencing.

"I started watching a lot of sport on TV. Hours of tennis or cricket, anything to give me a break from having to think. It sounds strange but after, for a while, I felt a bit better in myself because I had had that break..."

Talking about your child

Many parents want to speak about their child and the traumatic events that have just occurred. Many of us replay these events in our mind, often to the point where we might feel like we are losing it! Don't worry, it is normal to feel this way.

For some people, it can be comforting to speak to an understanding family member or friend. It helps to say our child's name. However, because other family members are also grieving, or you may feel like they don't really understand, it can be helpful to speak to another bereaved parent.

Parents at Anam Cara find solace from one another knowing that each of us can truly understand the enormity of a child's loss.

"I started watching a lot of sport on TV. Hours of tennis or cricket, anything to give me a break from having to think. It sounds strange but after, for a while, I felt a bit better in myself because I had had that break..."

"A lot of people around me simply continued on with their lives, as if nothing important had happened. Sometimes I did that too, I pretended that I was ok and coping. But inside I felt like I was dying. With other bereaved parents I could be totally honest and it helped..."

"Talking to other bereaved parents who are further down the road helped us to have hope that the overwhelming sense of loss will get easier in time, although it is hard to believe that in the early stages."

Consider writing it down

Many parents in Anam Cara have found it helpful to write their thoughts down. They do this in different ways. Some use a journal and others write a letter to their child. While others remember their child in poetry or song.

Writing can help you say the things that you did not get a chance to say when your child was alive.

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Listening to... yourself

In general, after the death of a child, people around you are well meaning and want to help. But because they often do not know what to say, they may say or do the wrong thing – this can upset or annoy you.

You may find certain situations difficult, like family gatherings or being around friends and their children. It can be a time when many of us are hypersensitive to every comment or look we receive. We may read too much into these or take offence when none was intended.

Everyone's grief is different. We are all trying to cope as best we can. Parents at Anam Cara have found that it is unhelpful to try to always please other people at this time. Sometimes we need to rest, or not be around certain people, or just avoid certain situations.

On the other hand, sometimes getting out or getting away for a night can help lift our mood for a while. We can drop the mask. Making the right choices for you is a form of self-care. Above all, listen to yourself and how you are feeling.

Make time for your own healing

"After a while I learned how to say 'No'. It was the best thing I ever did..."

"We got so fed up being pulled here and there, when we no more wanted to go. We were so tired. We didn't want to pretend anymore that everything was ok..."

"I hated my neighbour coming over because she still had her little girl. I couldn't bear to see her. So I started making excuses. I felt bad, but I knew it wouldn't do me any good to see them..."

"I think getting away for a break even for one night can really help. Grief is exhausting, so having a massage or some treatment can help relieve some of that built up tension."

"I found by not holding back my tears when I needed a good cry helped me. Crying let my pain out"

Holistic treatments, like reflexology or acupuncture can help release some of the stress that builds up with intense grief after the death of a child.

Self-care can be as simple as setting aside some time every day to:

- to sit with your grief each day
- take a short walk or
- find a new activity or hobby

It's about being aware of your needs and what helps you through this difficult time.

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 Death of a Child' and 'The Grieving Family'.

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



Anam Cara



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