

The Bereaved Parent

by Lea-awnne Niamath

During the grief process, bereaved parents may take a long time to adjust to the loss of their child. Perhaps longer than other types of losses. Some factors which can complicate this kind of grief are:

If the parent is a single parent (may have limited support)

If the child was an only child (all purpose in life seems lost)

The nature of the death (murder, suicide, disease, sudden death)

Not the natural order of life (children bury their parents)

Not as common as the death of a spouse or parental death so shared experience is limited

It is important to support grieving parents in a way, which acknowledges the uniqueness of their loss and gives them permission to grieve "for as long as it takes". Names have been given to survivors of other losses, e.g.: widow, widower, orphan etc. but there is no "name" for those parents whose children have died.

Grief care providers can be a tremendous support to newly bereaved parents if their communication approach incorporates an awareness of these differences. The following are some of the comments received by newly bereaved parents.

WHAT NOT TO SAY TO A BEREAVED PARENT

"You can have more children"

Remember that all a bereaved parent really wishes, is to have their child back. Not a replacement child. When people suggest having more children., the importance of the child who died is diminished as if they can be replaced somehow. There may be reasons that the parents cannot have children, which would make a comment like this even more inappropriate.

"Thank God you have other children"

Somehow suggests that the surviving children in the family will make up for the dead child. It is true that when the energy for life is restored, there are activities and experiences the surviving children provide for bereaved parents. However, the loss of the individual who was your child is gone forever: even tiny babies have personalities.

"God wanted her"

Whether the parents have a religious affiliation or not, some parents do not believe that their child was “chosen” to die. For some bereaved parents, issues around faith are challenged most at the loss of a child. For some parents, it can be their greatest source of strength.

“He’s in a better place”

Comments like this imply that parents maintain a belief system, which teaches that there is a “better” place. Not all bereaved parents have a belief system, let alone believe in a better place. For some, they simply feel their child is gone. One parent said, “the best place for our child was in his home.”

“Your child would not want to see you so sad”

As with many types of grief, this comment can create guilt feelings for the bereaved parent. It suggests that although they loved their child, they “owe it to their child” to be happy and there is a limit to the amount of sadness they can experience.

“Don’t grieve around the surviving children; it will upset them”

Yes, a grieving parent can be very frightening for surviving children in a family. But when parents “hide” their grief or feelings, they create mystery around a very normal human process. The only way children learn healthy grief responses is through their parents. It is acceptable for parents to explain to their children when they are sad or that they need time to be alone to work through their grief. It is especially important for parents to talk about the child who has died.

“I know how you feel....my father (mother, aunt) just passed away”

When a child dies, a parent is left to mourn a life that was not lived. They are grieving what could have been, first steps, graduation, wedding etc. The loss of a parent cannot be compared to the loss of a child even though the separation from both is very painful.

“Are you feeling better?”

Whether the loss occurred 4 months or 4 years ago, there may never be a time when a bereaved parent feels “better”. They may just feel different. This does not mean they cannot enjoy life again, but they will never lose that part of them which belonged to their child. The scar is always present.

WHAT TO SAY TO A BEREAVED PARENT

“I don’t know what to say”

An honest, straightforward response to parents, that still ACKNOWLEDGES THE LOSS. When friends and family do not mention the loss, it can feel like the child never existed.

“You must miss (child’s name).” or “I was thinking about (child’s name) today.”

Use the child’s name as often as you would if they were alive. They still live in the hearts of their parents.

“How is today going?”

This is a great alternative to “how are you”. In the early stages, you can be sure that parents are not “fine” even though they may say that out of habit.

“Do you have a picture of your child” or “what was your child like”

Parents want to know that whatever the age of their child, their life had meaning. When you ask about the child, it reinforces the fact that they played an important role in the family. This is especially important for parents surviving SIDS or stillborn deaths.

“How are the other children”

Sometimes, friends and family are so grief-stricken about the dead child they forget about surviving siblings. It is important to acknowledge their grief process as well.

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