

Coping with Judgemental Attitudes

The death of our child is the worst thing that can happen to us, whatever the cause. For each family, the pain and loss are unique, and it is a struggle to carry on with life. However, some of us have to bear, as well, the burden of a society which is harshly critical of our child, for a variety of reasons. These include deaths resulting from: drug, alcohol, and solvent abuse; prostitution; illnesses such as anorexia; dangerous recreational activities; involvement in crime; accidents where there has been a responsibility for the deaths of others; and suicide. When these circumstances exist, some people may express opinions such as "He brought it on himself," or "It was her choice," and have the attitude that we are not entitled to the same respect or sympathy for our grief that is shown to others.

The years before our child's death

Some of us have suffered years of trauma and conflict before our child died. We have lived with unpredictability and perhaps had lengthy discussions with schools, police, hospitals or social services, always hoping that the problems would be resolved and that our loved child would overcome his or her troubles. We may have had to cope with constant anxiety, asking ourselves "Where is he?" or "What is she doing?", waiting for the next knock on the door or phone call to summon us to the police station or hospital. Sometimes we have found ourselves in conflict with the authorities over what is best for our child; sometimes we have had no idea that there was a problem at all. We may have lost touch with our son or daughter altogether, and news of the death may come after a long silence, broken occasionally by rumours. We have often borne the burden of our anxieties with the support of only a few trusted friends and relatives - too ashamed to admit openly the extent and nature of our family's difficulties.

Whatever the individual circumstances, our grief begins when we are already at a low ebb, worn down by worry and uncertainty. For some, it will seem that the grief actually began long ago when our troubled child became unreachable, and death is another phase in a prolonged and frightening nightmare. While our child was alive, there was still the hope that things could improve. It was this belief that kept us going through the day-to-day despair; the strain of pretending everything was all right to the outside world; and the struggle of working and keeping the family functioning normally. However difficult these times were, they came to an abrupt end with the shattering news that our son or daughter had died.

The early days

The news of our child's death is always a terrible shock. The numbness that follows often protects us from reality for a while, but sooner or later feelings flood in, threatening to overwhelm us. Most people feel some guilt when their child has died, thinking that, if they had acted differently, they could have prevented the death. For parents whose child has died in a way that others may consider as anti-social, these feelings are complicated, from the outset, by an inordinate amount of shame. Even before we are subjected to the opinions and judgements of others, we begin to accuse ourselves, and believe that we may have failed as parents.

The contradictory nature of our feelings can be very frightening. We may experience violent rage at what our child has done, to himself and to our family, and yet also feel intensely protective of him, understanding his pain and confusion in a new light. We may acknowledge an unvoiced relief - quickly followed by guilt - that the long nightmare is over, that there is an end to the trauma and uncertainty of what they will do next, yet wish we could turn the clock back so that they were still alive. We may be ashamed that their actions have damaged others, and yet want to find someone or something else to blame for what has happened, for it not to have been our child's responsibility. Each particular set of circumstances will have its own agonies.

Many people have to be told the news of the death: our other children; relatives; friends; neighbours; and staff in schools or work. The police may be involved, and sometimes the media. As well as the inevitable procedures, such as identification and post-mortem, there may be decisions to make about how much information we disclose, at least in the early days. If the media are persistent, it is a good idea to issue a brief statement, and then ask them to respect our privacy and our grief. It can sometimes be possible for a relative or friend to speak for us.



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When we begin to plan the funeral, which unfortunately may be delayed by legal processes, the pain of the circumstances of the death may make it hard to decide what form it will take. As a family we should begin to look back on the whole of the child's life, rather than focus on the immediate past.

Other people

Some people either never speak of what has happened, or unwittingly say hurtful things. Our children who have died in ways which attract criticism are most often young adults; some of the people we meet may suggest that their loss is easier to bear than the deaths of small children. We hear comments like "He was grown-up and living his own life," or "You couldn't have been responsible for her actions." All bereaved parents dread the question "How many children have you got?". However, we have the extra problem of deciding how to reply to "How did your child die?". We may find that those whom we thought of as close friends avoid us, while help is found in unexpected places.

Our surviving children may hear unkind comments about their dead brother or sister, and want us to tell them that the stories are untrue. If we can, we will, but we may not always be able to reassure them or protect them. We may find ourselves needing to support vulnerable members of our family while feeling unsupported ourselves. Sometimes we will imagine censure and criticism where none was intended, but the feelings of isolation and shame are real to us and we suffer intensely.

Some of us are affected much more than others by publicity at the inquest and negative, or even false, reporting of stories about our child. The length of time that often elapses between the death and the inquest means that feelings that we had hoped were behind us are re-awakened; we are travelling this painful road again. The media may resurrect our story many times, even years later, when a similar event occurs.

The family

There are some constructive things that we can do. We can reassure our surviving children that we love them and that we still love their dead brother or sister; that love is not conditional, and that we can be angry with someone's actions but still love them. We can answer their questions honestly, while not burdening them with details they cannot understand or absorb at the present time. Our friends may not know what to say to us, but we too may be locked in silence, even though we want to share our feelings. There are some people that we must speak to about the situation at home, such as our surviving children's teachers. If help is offered to us in the way of counselling, we can consider it carefully rather than dismissing it out of hand. It is often easier to unburden ourselves to a complete stranger whom we need never see again: there may be some aspects of our child's death that we are ashamed to admit even to family or close friends. We can try not to isolate ourselves through fear of what others might be saying or thinking, though this can be hard to do.

The first time that we resume any part of our daily routine is usually the worst: going shopping, returning to work, attending meetings and social gatherings. When we have faced up to these situations, we have the courage to carry on. It is preferable that people move at their own pace, and each family member will have different feelings and preoccupations. Support groups, made up of people who have been through similar tragedies, can be very useful in helping us to feel that we are not alone.

In the long term, we all must find our own way of grieving, adapting to what has happened, and living with what cannot be changed. If there is conflict within the family about past events and how these were handled, such disagreements can be bitter and damaging. Sometimes we find difficulty in accepting the circumstances of our child's death; talking about the death, and the events surrounding it, may be too painful for us. Tolerance, patience and understanding will be needed if the family is not to break apart.

Our surviving children have much to contend with. There is a danger of our becoming over-anxious, protective or excessively strict because of what happened, at a time when our children are themselves



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battling with a whole army of conflicting feelings. They are sometimes angry with their dead sibling for the chaos he or she has wrought within the family, and the years of anxiety which have overshadowed their lives. They may show resentment towards us, their parents, either for not preventing the death, or for allowing their dead brother or sister to behave in the way that they did. Sometimes, all our focus has been on the member of the family causing problems for so long that the brothers and sisters have felt neglected and, in some cases, unloved and of less importance. Some of our children feel that we have not been honest in the past, and we have covered up for their troubled sibling, forcing the family into isolation by what was going on; others may think that they are being labelled by what has happened, or feel tempted to experiment with the same experiences, or feel pressure to do so from their peers. Low self-esteem can adversely affect their ability to cope with social situations. Good friends, who can cope with mood swings and who stick by them in the bad times, are invaluable. So, too, are adults who can listen to them, and who are, perhaps, more able than their parents to bring some degree of calm into the turmoil. When we find that the problems are insoluble, it is better to seek professional help than allow situations to fester.

The future

Although we are scarred forever by what has happened, time does help us to find ways of coping and living with grief. We can begin to remember the good times we enjoyed as a family, and the joy our child brought to us. If our surviving children are quite young at the time of the tragedy, we need to find a way of continuing to talk about what has happened, so that as they grow older they reach a mature understanding of the facts, and do not have to cope with either secrecy or falsehood. Though anniversaries are painful, they can be a time to talk, to share memories, and to avoid the tragedy becoming something that is cloaked in silence.

Our child is part of our family for ever - long after the media and society have forgotten the circumstances in which they died - and we will always love them.



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