

Can we hold back the night

'The world is very harsh and the moment our child is born they are vulnerable to attack from all fronts.

We love them unconditionally and do the best we can, but we cannot hold back the night.'

by Mitch Carmody, The Compassionate Friends of USA

Guilt is a powerful emotion, and it seems to be a common feeling for a newly bereaved parent. We "what if" ourselves to death. "What if I had noticed the symptoms sooner and taken my child to the hospital. "What if I hadn't bought that new car for my child? "What if I had paid more attention and noticed that my child was severely depressed and gotten help for him/her? "What if I had been more watchful and noticed that my child had been getting in with the wrong crowd, etc. etc. It seems normal and right to feel guilt. But, one of the problems with guilt, is that it is a somewhat useless and debilitating emotion "after the fact" (after the fact of our child's death). It is true that sometimes guilt will prompt us to change a bad habit, stop doing something we shouldn't do and begin doing something we should do. When guilt is correctly tied to our conscience it can cause us to take a better action, go down a better path, make a change we need to make, become a better person. In these cases guilt prompts actions which are better and right. But, when our child is dead and we cannot take an action to bring the child back, guilt may lay like a heavy rock on our heart, since there is no way to correct what went wrong.

The specific cause of my daughter, Bonnie's, death, was an automobile accident. Bonnie was an inexperienced driver and she made a driving mistake. A terrible series of random occurrences played out, and it happened that a larger vehicle travelling the legal speed on the highway came over the rise in the road and directly slammed into her side (the driver's side) of the vehicle. No, I didn't tell her to drive this other person's vehicle, and I certainly wished she hadn't. But, "What if I had exercised more parental control over her? "What if I had been a stricter father and demanded that she be at home at a certain reasonable time each night? "What if I had broken up her friendship with the guy who owned the vehicle she was driving (then she would not have been out with him that night, all night)? "What if I had taken her on many driving lessons myself and helped her to be a better driver? "What if I had impressed on her firmly that she was to never, ever drive someone else's car? "What if, "What it, "What if"

As a bereaved parent, I was troubled by my part in the train of events that led to what happened. Simply by not doing something (by being strict etc.) had I allowed/caused this to happen? Bonnie on her own, had corrected some things in her life a few months prior to her accident. She had pulled away from most of the bad influences in her life, had gotten a part time job and was going down a better path.

And maybe I can say this on behalf of bereaved fathers (and mothers), we are pulled in many different directions as parents. For fathers, there's bills to pay, grass to cut, cars to repair, toilets to unstop, etc. For mothers there's meals to fix, housework to do, children to take to the doctor, teachers to talk to, etc. And I think I can safely say, that we are all imperfect parents. All human beings are imperfect and since parents are human, well ... you see the point.

So then, how should we see our part in what happened to our child? As mature adults, usually 20-35 years older than our child, we are obliged to set a good example for our children using our values, morals, and experience. And of course we should share verbally with our child what she/he needs to hear. And our children have certain basic needs which we must satisfy. But can "we hold back the night" – the bad influences, the dangerous deeds, random occurrences, genetic bad health, etc? Maybe we need to "cut ourselves some slack" as bereaved parents.



We are imperfect, just like our children. Maybe now is the time to look at the man in the mirror and say, "I tried, I tried. I made some mistakes, in fact, I may have made a lot of mistakes but in my own way, I did try." We loved our children and we didn't want this to happen to them but maybe they understand our frailties better than we know. And maybe we can come out of our own "night" of sadness and move into the sunlight.

*Written by David Haddock,
In memory of Bonnie Catherine Haddock 6.2.1985 – 13.8.2002
The Compassionate Friends, Clinton, Mississippi, USA*