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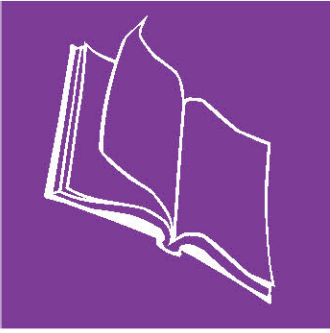

Grieving, Healing, and Remembering

#1531

PHOENIX CHILDREN'S Hospital

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Grieving, Healing, and Remembering

Grieving

The death of a child can be the most difficult and shocking loss a person can have. Parents often say that missing their child never fully goes away. When someone close to you dies, you may have many different feelings. These feelings can be very strong or just stay in the background. They come and go. They change. At times, they can be confusing and overwhelming. These feelings are called grief. Grief is normal and a natural response.

You may not understand your grief. You may not know what to expect over the next weeks and months. You may not know what to do or how to cope.

Your health care provider wants to help you get through this difficult time. This booklet will describe the feelings of grief. It will tell you how you can take care of yourself. It will guide you through the process of healing, and offer some suggestions on how to remember the child you have lost.

What to expect

People are different from one another. We each react to death differently. How we react also differs with who dies and what they meant to us. There is no right or wrong way to grieve.

Here are some ways people feel and think:

- don't believe it
- shock
- depressed
- empty
- angry
- lonely
- helpless
- regret
- sad
- rejected
- frustrated
- fear
- afraid
- abandoned
- confused
- numb
- despair
- guilt
- bitter
- panic
- want to blame something or someone
- relief, because the child is not suffering any more
- thinking you should have done something differently
- wanting to protect your living children

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These feelings don't happen in order, one after the other. They come and go. Some feelings may be stronger than others. Some may never appear.

When you first learn your child has died, you may feel stunned. Children are not supposed to die before their parents and grandparents. It is hard to believe the child is gone.

No one knows exactly how you feel. It may be hard to accept how life has changed. Pictures or things that belonged to the loved one may be comforting or upsetting.

You may look for answers. What happened? How did it happen? Why did it happen?

You may cry very hard at times, or not cry at all. You may be angry. You may have trouble sleeping or eating. When you do sleep, you may have nightmares. You may feel pains and think you are sick or dying.

Grief may show up in your body. You may have:
- pain in your back, neck, or muscles
- stomach pain, loose stools or hard dry stools
- chest pain
- trouble breathing
- headaches
- dry mouth
- trouble eating and losing weight
- eating too much and gaining weight
- get sick more often
- chills or sweats
- restless
- nervous
- trouble falling asleep or staying asleep
- nightmares
- be bothered by noise or light
- less energy

You may think you see the child who has died, and then remember that he or she is dead. You may have conversations with the person who had died.

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Weeks or months later, you may realize that you will never see your loved one again, and may feel very, very sad. You may become very quiet and stay away from people. You may forget how to do things you used to do all the time. You may forget things you used to know.

Things you used to enjoy may not be fun anymore. You may feel that others who are having fun are not being sensitive to your feelings. You may see nothing good in the future. You may wonder why you are alive. You may wish you were dead instead of the loved one. You may feel like you are going crazy.

Grief may show in your mind and relationships:
- less pleasure with things you used to enjoy
- cry more
- feel like you cannot cry
- trouble paying attention
- not able to focus
- trouble remembering recent things
- trouble making decisions
- thinking about your loss all the time
- confusion
- feeling your life has no meaning
- loss of faith
- questioning your beliefs
- angry
- feeling alone
- separated from family and friends
- not interested in doing things you used to do
- wanting to stay away from groups of people
- not wanting to be close to people

The loss of a child changes family relationships. Parents may grieve in different ways and at different speeds. This can put stress on a relationship. The family changes routines and roles and creates a new normal.

Grief is an energy, and you must let yourself feel it before it will soften. How long these feelings last is different for each of us. What was your relationship with the loved one? What are your experiences with death? How is your own health? If you have people to talk to and be there for you, you may feel better sooner.

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Slowly, the grief may change. In months, you may slowly begin to eat and sleep again. You may start to go out. Then, a holiday or birthday may remind you of your loved one, and the grief may be harder. Then the grief will fade away again. As feelings of grief soften, you may feel guilty for having fun. You don't get over grief. You learn to live with it. Most people need six months to two years to grieve. Some people may need more time. There is no right or wrong amount of time for grieving.

Healing

After a child dies, it takes time to get back balance and the ability to be happy again. There are things you can do to help the healing.

Grief is hard work. It takes time and energy. Take care of yourself so you can help the ones you love. Here are some things you can do to move toward healing. If you do these things, others in your family are more likely to feel comfortable doing them, too.

• Talk about the death
Find someone who will listen to you. If you cannot find someone to listen, write down your feelings every day. This is called keeping a journal. It will help you express your feelings. Later, you can read the journal and see how your feelings changed over time.

• Show emotions
Let yourself fully experience the feelings of grief, such as shock, sadness, anger, and loneliness. If you have trouble showing your feelings to others, set aside a time every day to think about your child and experience the feelings that come up.

• Forgive yourself
Forgive yourself for the things you said or did. Forgive yourself for the things you did not say or do. Focus on the good memories.

• Accept help
Make a list of things others could do for you. When they offer to help, you can give them choices of things they can do for you. You may want help with cooking, cleaning, errands, or taking care of your children. This will give you time to think, remember, and grieve.

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• Do your everyday things
Eat at your normal eating times. Drink plenty of water and eat a healthy diet of fruits, vegetables and protein. Go to sleep at your normal sleeping times. Go to work or school. Be active, even if you want to stay in bed. Exercise. Take a walk, choose stairs instead of elevators, and park further away in the parking lot. Do these things even when you don't feel like it.

• Don't make big changes
If possible, avoid making major decisions, such as changing jobs or moving in the first year after the loss. Don't rush to pack up your child's room or to give away toys and clothes. Changes increase stress. There is security in returning to normal.

• Join a support group.
Only another parent who loses a child can fully understand your loss. Join a support group to share experiences with other parents who understand your grief and can offer hope.

MISS Foundation - Mothers in Support and Sympathy
www.misschildren.org

Compassionate Friends
http://www.phoenixchildrens.org/health-information/the-emily-center/child-health-topics/support-groups/compassionate-friends

New Song Center for Grieving Children and Those Who Love Them
http://www.phoenixchildrens.org/health-information/the-emily-center/child-health-topics/support-groups/new-song-center-for-grieving

• Continue to do the activities you enjoy
Give yourself a break from grieving. Do some pleasant activities. Spend time with friends and supportive family members. Go out to dinner, take a relaxing bath, watch a movie, take a yoga class, or enjoy the outdoors. It is good for you to enjoy yourself. Even though you've had a loss, it is OK to laugh and feel happy. Children need to see you happy, so they feel they can have fun, too.

• Express your feelings in a creative way
You can work through the feelings of grief in creative ways, such as art, music, or writing. Later you can look back on what you created to see how your grief changed over time.

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• Plan for grief triggers
Birthdays, holidays, or certain sights, sounds, and smells may take you back to the loss. Know these will happen and decide what you will do when you come upon a trigger. Remind yourself this is normal.

• Let others grieve at their own pace
Grief comes and goes, and everyone does it differently and at different times. When people who live together grieve differently, it can be hard. One person may be angry when the other is sad. Accept how other people grieve. Keep talking to one another, even if you feel differently.

• Be patient
Grieve at your own pace. Don't tell yourself you should be coping better or getting over this more quickly. Be patient with yourself.

• Is it grief or is there a problem?
At times, normal grieving can be extreme and upsetting. But sometimes people have trouble grieving, or the loss of a child sets off a problem. Grieving improves with healing, but a problem will not get better on its own, and may get worse. You need to take care of the problem. Here are signs that you may need to talk to a health care professional about your reactions:
— Always withdrawn
— Feeling numb and disconnected from others
— Intense longing or yearning that doesn't stop
— Not able to take care of yourself
— Depression that keeps you from daily activities
— Feeling sick, or afraid you are sick or dying
— Blaming yourself for the loss
— Not believing your child is dead
— Imagining that your child is alive
— Searching for the child
— Flashbacks that don't stop
— Bad dreams that get worse
— Having trouble trusting others
— Extreme anger or bitterness over the death
— Abusing substances
— Taking risks that are unusual for you
— Behaving destructively

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— Wishing you had died with your child
— Thoughts of killing yourself
— Thoughts of killing other people
If you have any of these signs, you need to ask for help.

A good place to start is a doctor or nurse practitioner. Make sure a physical illness is not causing the problem. If it is not a physical problem, the health care provider may suggest counseling.

People who have too much stress may need some extra help. Sometimes the person needs help grieving or needs to learn how to grieve. In a bereavement group many people facing a loss meet to talk about their feelings. A bereavement counselor is a specialist in helping people grieve. Ministers, priests, rabbis, and shaman help people cope with losses, too.

Sometimes the best way to get help is through a counselor or therapist. These specialists are trained to help people deal with their feelings and practice healthy behaviors. They may have degrees in psychology, psychiatry, psychiatric nursing, social work, or counseling.

Another place to get help is the Employee Assistance Program at work. These programs may not cost anything.

There are also places to get help in the community. Here are some that help with grieving:

Compassionate Friends
623-580-9885
www.tcfphoenix.org/meetings.htm

New Song Center for Bereaved Children
480-951-8985
Email:info@thenewsongcenter.org
www.thenewsongcenter.org

MISS Foundation
623-979-1000 - answered by bereaved mothers
Email: info@missfoundation.org
www.misschildren.org

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Remembering

You will never forget the child you lost. So take some time to think about how you might prepare for those times when grief comes up again, and celebrate the time you had with your child.

Decide how you will answer a hard question like, "How many children do you have?" How will you respond if someone who finds out you lost a child says, "At least you have other children." Keep in mind they are not trying to hurt you. They just don't know what to say.

Important events in the lives of your other children, like graduation or marriage, can trigger grief years after your child's death. You may find yourself thinking about how old your child would be, or what he or she would look like or be doing if he or she were still alive.

Decide how you want to spend days like your child's birthday or the anniversary of your child's death. You may want to start a family tradition, like looking at photos, telling stories, or planting flowers.

You may want to plan rituals or activities that help you remember. Some people plan rituals in honor of their child's birthday. Others choose to express their grief through small daily or weekly rituals. A ritual can be as elaborate as a public memorial service or as small as a quiet moment alone with your child's picture. Here are some examples:

— Light a candle at certain special times to remind you of your child, for example, at dinner or on your child's birthday.
— Visit your child's burial site. Decorate your child's grave with balloons, flowers, toys, a wreath, small windsock or a pinwheel.
— Send announcements or memorial cards to your friends and family to let them know that your child died. Include the child's name and birth information.
— Prepare a meal in honor of your child.
— Create a memory scrapbook and fill it with photographs, letters, postcards, or notes of memories from your life together.
— Listen to your child's favorite music. Create a playlist of music that reminds you of your child.
— Watch your child's favorite movie.
— Wear jewelry with your child's birthstone.

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— Write a letter to your child.
— Write a message to your child. Tie the note onto the string of a helium-filled balloon. Release the balloon into the sky.
— Write a song or poetry to or about your child.
— On the anniversary of your child's death, send the hospital a plant to be given to the next family that loses a child.
— Plant a tree or flowers in your child's memory. Add a sign that says, "Garden of ..." or "In Memory of …"
— Carry a photo or something special that reminds you of your child. Look at it or hold it when you need to. Tell your child how you feel.
— Create a work of art in your child's memory.
— Send family and friends packets of flower seeds (forget-me-nots are especially meaningful) on your child's birthday.
— Collect something your child liked, like angels, stars, or teddy bears.
— Create an online memorial at www.imorial.com
— Decorate a T-shirt or make a quilt from your child's clothes. Use it when you need to be comforted and feel close to your child
— Take the energy from your grief to help other families.

Now that you've read this:

❒ Tell your nurse or doctor where you are in the grieving process now. (Check when done)
❒ Tell your nurse or doctor where your other family members are in the grieving process now. (Check when done)
❒ Tell your nurse or doctor what you can do to help yourself grieve, heal, and remember. (Check when done)
❒ Tell you nurse or doctor what you can do to help your family grieve, heal, and remember. (Check when done)

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If you want to learn more:

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Bernstein, J. R. (1998). When The Bough Breaks: Forever After the Death of a Son or Daughter: Andrews McMeel Publishing

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Fitzgerald, H. (1995). The Mourning Handbook: The Most Comprehensive Resource Offering Practical and Compassionate Advice on Coping with All Aspects of Death and Dying Touchstone.

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Kübler-Ross, E. The Five Stages of Grief. Retrieved from http://grief.com/the-five-stages-of-grief/

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Tousley, M. (2008). Finding Your Way through Grief: A Guide for the First Year (2nd ed.). Phoenix: Hospice of the Valley.

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Worden, J. W. (2010). The Four Tasks of Mourning. Retrieved from www.hov.org/sites/default/files/file_attach/four_tasks_mourning.pdf

Worden, J. W. (2009) Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy (Third Edition): A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner. New York: Spring Publishing Co.

Bereavement - U.S. National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/bereavement.html

Brochures for Grief Support - The Compassionate Friends www.compassionatefriends.org/resources/Store/available_brochures.aspx

End of Life Issues - U.S. National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/endoflifeissues.html

Grief Resources - The Dougy Center: The National Center for Grieving Children and Families www.dougy.org/grief-resources/

The New Song Center - The New Song Center for Grieving Children www.hov.org/welcome-new-song-center-grieving-children

Comfort Zone Camp - Bereavement camp for children www.comfortzonecamp.org

Stepping Stones of Hope - Bereavement camp for families www.steppingstonesofhope.org

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If you have any questions or concerns,
❒ call your child's doctor or ❒ call _____

If you want to know more about child health and illness,
visit our library at The Emily Center at Phoenix Children's Hospital
1919 East Thomas Road
Phoenix, AZ 85016
602-933-1400
866-933-6459
www.phoenixchildrens.org
www.theemilycenter.org
Facebook: facebook.com/theemilycenter
Twitter: @emilycenter
Pinterest: pinterest.com/emilycenter

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The information provided at this site is intended to be general information, and is provided for educational purposes only. It is not intended to take the place of examination, treatment, or consultation with a physician. Phoenix Children's Hospital urges you to contact your physician with any questions you may have about a medical condition.

Tuesday, September 22, 2015 • in Family Review
#1531 • Written by Janet Leathers, DO, Jordana Fox, DO, Amanda Saraf, DO, Jennifer Fleming, MA, CCLS, Dr. Tressia Shaw, Dr. Wendy Bernatavicius, Caryn Kondo • Illustrated by Irene Takamizu

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Grieving, Healing, and Remembering

Name of Health Care Provider: _____

Date returned: _____ ❒ db

Family Review of Handout

Health care providers: Please teach families with this handout.
Families: Please let us know what you think of this handout.

Would you say this handout is hard to read? ❒ Yes ❒ No

easy to read? ❒ Yes ❒ No

Please circle the parts of the handout that were hard to understand.

Would you say this handout is interesting to read? ❒ Yes ❒ No

Why or why not?

Would you do anything differently after reading this handout? ❒ Yes ❒ No

If yes, what?

After reading this handout, do you have any questions about the subject? ❒ Yes ❒ No

If yes, what?

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Is there anything you don't like about the drawings? ❒ Yes ❒ No

If yes, what?

What changes would you make in this handout to make it better or easier to understand?

Please return your review of this handout to your nurse or doctor or send it to the address below.

The Emily Center
Health Education Specialist
Phoenix Children's Hospital
1919 East Thomas Road
Phoenix, AZ 85016-7710

602-933-1395

Thank you for helping us!

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