



Unthinkable... Facing Grief After a Child's Death

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Jan and Bob could not believe what they were hearing. Their nine-year-old son, Ryan, had ridden his bike around the corner to a friend's house. Ryan's simple outing turned tragic when he was hit by a car. He never regained consciousness and died two days later.

After the accident, the only word Bob could conjure to describe what had happened was "unthinkable". He continued: "Nothing in my years as a husband, or dad, none of my experience in business, none of my education – nothing prepared for me this moment. It was just unthinkable."

Acknowledge the "senselessness"

Much grief work is a search for meaning – spiritually and psychologically attempting to make some sense out of tragedy. Yet when a child dies, our usual "sense-making" beliefs and notions fail. The usual cliché, "he lived a long, full life," simply doesn't apply. "Only the good die young" offers no comfort. All we know is that our assumptions are shattered, especially the ones that affirm children should outlive their parents.

Though the deaths of young people don't make sense, eventually parents, family members and friends do find meaning in the loss. They embrace a cause to prevent another family from experiencing the same tragedy. They fondly recall the rich living crammed into a few short years by a young person gone too soon. And many times they discover depths of their own strength or rediscover vitality in their faith they never knew before.

Asking "Why?" rarely yields a satisfactory answer. Searching the senselessness of a child's death, however, encourages us to ask a different question: "What now?" Keeping a personal journal, interacting with a support group of other bereaved parents and talking with a clergyperson or professional counsellor all can help you find meaning in spite of the loss.

Understand that different people grieve in different ways

Because every relationship is unique, each experience with grief is different. This is especially true within families, where mums, dads, grandparents and siblings all face the grief in unique ways. Undoubtedly, everyone in the family and larger community experiences the sadness of a child's death but that sadness might be expressed in diverse ways. Some cry, while others don't. One might "take charge" and appear to face the death with calm objectivity. Some people talk out their grief, while others cope from a much more reflective stance – perhaps writing and thinking more but talking less.

What you can do is share what you are feeling, thinking and experiencing. You also can acknowledge that the experiences of others in your family or friendship circle likely will not mirror your own. Remind yourself that different people, including your partner if you have one, probably will express the thoughts, feelings and experiences of bereavement differently. Respect others as they grieve in their own way.

Even in your own pain, acknowledge the bereavement experience of other family members like siblings and grandparents, for example. In your community, there may be specialised grief counsellors available who have training and experience attending to the needs of bereaved children and teens. Your funeral director will know of local resources.

And remember that grandparents often are overlooked in grief. They suffer the experience of grief over a grandchild who has died and they also struggle with their parental desire to relieve the pain of their own child, the parent of the child who has died. Mary Lou Reed, one bereaved grandmother, wrote a book whose title reflects this reality: *Grandparents Cry Twice*.

Face the overwhelming pain

The emotional and spiritual pain experienced by bereaved people includes some pronounced emotions after a child's death. Anger cries out at the injustice of a "death out of time" and is especially evident after a child's unexpected death.

Guilt quietly whispers, "If only we had...." Parents sense a need to protect their children, so the death of a child argues "failure" loudly. Irrational though the guilt may be, parents, other family members and friends often feel they should have done something differently.

Fear haunts bereaved people with the questions of whether they ever will begin to live again, whether this same tragedy could occur a second time and whether any of our deeply held beliefs are true. Loneliness becomes a companion as you realise that no human alive – not friends, not your partner, not a professional – really understands all the nuances of your pain.

Not everybody talks about his or her emotions. Writing about your loss in a journal or diary can be helpful, even when you don't feel like talking. What does not help is spending increasing amounts of time away from people who know about the loss and want to walk with you. You sometimes must make a wilful decision not to withdraw from your spouse, family and close friends. They will not always understand but their supportive presence is invaluable.

Reach out to others

Bereavement must not become a solo pursuit. Grief is best resolved when it is shared with someone else. Reaching out to others can take on many different forms.

Receive help graciously

Even when you want to hide away, remember that the whole community grieves – friends from school and their parents, colleagues at work, people in your faith community, neighbours and many others. Bringing meals, attending the services, answering the phone or cleaning your home are ways these people work through their own grief and serve you at the same time. Let them help.

Join a group

Many support programmes and Internet forums, which focus on grief after murder, cancer, suicide and infant death, exist for bereaved parents and families. Community agencies such as hospitals, hospices, faith groups and funeral homes also offer bereavement support.

Explore your faith

After a child's death, many people experience an intense crisis of belief. Because we cannot make sense of a death that is out of the natural order, we may question our assumptions and convictions. Reading, talking with a trusted spiritual advisor, writing, praying and meditating can be helpful in assessing your beliefs and discovering new depths of faith.

Talk to a professional counsellor

The experience of losing a child is overwhelming and the steadying guidance of a professional can be invaluable. In addition to your family doctor and clergy person, you might want to talk with a mental health professional who has a thorough understanding of bereavement after a child's death. By virtue of training and experience this person can help you cope with your loss, watch for danger signs, find additional resources and eventually, help you create a plan for the future.

Though parents, families and the community adapt to a child's death, bereavement is not something from which we really ever recover. Recovery implies a return to life as it used to be and, sadly, never will be again. But a child's death can create unparalleled opportunities for personal and spiritual growth.

Now, their story has become yours... Perhaps the details are different: cancer, car collision, heart disease, murder or suicide. The unthinkable has happened and you must find a way to reassemble the pieces of a shattered life.

The death of a young person can seem unimaginable. We have made such great strides in the detection and treatment of disease. We have made enormous progress in preventing accidents and saving the lives of those who are injured. But tragedy still occurs. We can't prepare for it, we don't expect it and we can't begin to fathom the depths of pain involved. How do you go on when have lost a child to death?

Jan and Bob eventually found new meaning and purpose in their lives. Bob said he became less focused on making every pound count and more focused on making every moment count. About three years after Ryan's death, Jan became part of a team that supports other bereaved parents. Both of them gained a deeper, richer view of their faith, though at first they questioned most of their deeply held beliefs.

This family still cries for Ryan, sometimes together and often separately. Holidays and birthdays have become easier but they are never easy. They haven't forgotten Ryan, nor have they "got over" their loss but they have learned to live again, to adapt, even though at first the whole experience just seemed unthinkable.

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