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Grieving the Loss of a Child

For a parent(s), there is no more difficult experience than the death of a child. Whether expected or unexpected, regardless of age or cause, a child's death seems unbelievable, unfair and soul wrenching. For parents, the trauma of losing a child is akin to losing a part of themselves. A family is never the same again because a significant member and loved one is missing – and no longer shares in the growth of that family.

The members of the Northern Illinois Critical Incident Management (NICISM) Team acknowledge, affirm and respect your deep feelings of confusion, anger, and sadness at this time. We offer this team to you as a resource for information, education and support. Our team is here for your family - and we stand ready to come alongside.

The information on these handouts is but one result of our ongoing work with many individuals and families who have also experienced the loss of a child. Our sincere and heart felt hope is that as you work through your own grieving process this information may serve as a small but helpful resource in the days and weeks to come.

The death of your child is unlike any other loss you will ever experience. Your child is seen as innocent and vulnerable. The realization that you are unable to protect him or her from death is apt to leave you feeling helpless and powerless. The loss of your child is a loss of a part of you. The grief that a parent experiences will vary in intensity, yet will last a lifetime. It will impact several different dimensions of your life: the individual parent, the marital dyad, the family system and the immediate community you live in. Eventually, the happy memories of your child may become a cherished source of comfort to you.

When faced with the realization that your child has died, you will respond with shock. It may seem unbelievable that your child's life has ended. You may have found yourself clinging to the desperate hope that somehow your child still lives. You may still refuse to believe that this or her death could be true.

Parents have shared that there is a delay of reactions, an overwhelming numbness and a sense of postponement. You may feel unable to respond to people and events around you. Conversations may seem distant and difficult to recall later. You may be unable to ask questions or hear the details concerning your child's death. Decision concerning the funeral and burial arrangements may be difficult. You may not even participate in parts of this process.

Family and friends can be a tremendous support during this time. Their availability to listen when you need to talk can provide comfort and support. In addition, family and friends may be helpful in assisting with arrangements that must be made during this time. Individuals have shared that their own church family was noted to be particularly sensitive, supportive and understanding. Pastoral care is especially encouraged and supported during these moments of aloneness.

Distorted reactions often surface during these earlier moments of loss and grief. Because the death of a child is particularly sad, people may feel uncertain as to what to say or do. You may think that some people are avoiding you are uncomfortable with you. People may be at loss for words of comfort or may say things that sound hurtful to you. You may feel angry. How you respond will probably depend on the particular situation and your own level of emotional energy. You may choose to ignore things that seem hurtful or you may choose to say "this is not helpful to me." Parents have shared they have struggled with faith, religious beliefs and have questioned God. Parent(s) perspectives reflect a hesitancy to openly share this aspect of loss. Often times this is because these are genuine feelings and they are uncomfortable for most people to respond to.

You will most likely experience the full impact of your loss sometime after your child's death - perhaps weeks or even months later. For a time you may find that you may be living as if you were "on automatic pilot." This may be that period in which you go through the motions of life without really being involved. You may find yourself as if in a dream or a living nightmare. With this realization, the emotional, mental, spiritual and physical pain of grief buried inside will emerge into your awareness. It may try to consume you as it fills you with intense moments and feelings of anger, emptiness, fear and sorrow. You may question circumstances related to your child's death. Feelings of guilt or concerns over what you should / should not have done may even surface to further beat you up. You may even remember or perhaps re-experience past feelings of loss from your own childhood or your adulthood. It is a very painful time for you and your family. No matter what the age of a child, many parents concur that they have lost their hopes, dreams, wishes, expectations and fantasies for this child.

Rage or anger you feel will be directed in different ways. This may in fact include some degree of anger toward your child for leaving you. Whereas overflowing hostility may appear spread out over several relationships (you may feel anger toward your spouse or other family members), it may also occur as furious hostility against specific persons such as the physicians, nurses or paramedics you may have interacted with. You might even wonder if somehow they caused your child's death. Seeing other families with children may be painful because of their togetherness and happiness. You may feel anger at their apparent lack of appreciation for each treasured moment with their children.

Anger may also be directed toward yourself in the form of self-blame, feelings of failure and shame. These feelings may challenge your perception of yourself as a competent, loving and protective parent. You may also question your ability to care for surviving or subsequent children as you may feel 'less than' a whole person. While these are natural feelings, especially during this time, it is important to remember your strengths as a parent. Positive memories of your relationship with your child can provide soothing comfort and help to rebuild your self-esteem.

You may feel an overwhelming sense of loneliness. Although you may be surrounded by family and friends who love and care for you, your grief isolates you. This may be accompanied by a physical sensation of aching inside your body. Your arms and legs may feel heavy and clumsy. You may feel as though you are functioning on a different emotional level than those around you. It may be difficult to put the experience of your grief into words. Many parents describe times when they feel as though they have lost all control of their emotions and sometimes fear they are "losing their minds."

You may find that you sleep all the time or are unable to sleep at all. When you do sleep, you may dream of your child. Initially, your dreams may be agitating. Over time, however, you may cherish that your dreams reflect positive experiences and become more of a source of healing. A variety of physical ailments may appear or become aggravated by the inner tension you experience. Physical reactions may include difficulty eating or over eating, gastrointestinal disturbances, physical exhaustion, heart palpitations, excessive moodiness, nervousness, or shortness of breath. If these reactions persist or interfere with your responsibilities, seek help from a pastor, therapist or physician.

Later grief is often accompanied by a sense of yearning or searching for the "absent" child. You may feel an overwhelming desire to hold your child in your arms again, to be reunited. The frustration in not being able to fulfill this desire may be experienced as restlessness, irritability, a blank trance-like stare for hours at a time and transient depression. You may, over time, even struggle to keep a clear picture in your mind of your child's appearance or special mannerisms. Don't be too hard on yourself. You may however find it comforting to keep special mementos of your child. Remembrances of your child may include a picture, a name bracelet, a blanket, a lock of hair, a special toy, or pictures and cards from family and friends.

Parents have expressed that they have attempted to fill the emptiness they feel by wishing to have another child. This is a decision that is best postponed during the immediate period after a child's death to allow time for the parents to mourn the loss. After a time a new baby can be welcomed for himself or herself rather than as a replacement.

Range, intensity of sorrow and grief expressions are broad. Each person grieves in his or her own way; depending on religious beliefs, past experiences (particularly with loss), cultural patterns, relationship with the child, circumstances surrounding the death (i.e., anticipated vs. sudden) and other current and immediate life stressors. *There is no right way to grieve* other than what feels right for you. However, find some minimal comfort in knowing that this period of *intense* grief will end. The intensity of the pain, will over time, diminish and you will find ways to live with your grief. There may be moments when a passing memory or special date will trigger some intense feelings of grief and flood your spirit with heaviness. Over time and through healing you will be better able to cope with these burdens.