

Transforming your Life after the Death of a Child

The death of a child is an excruciating and life-changing experience for any parent and their surviving children and family. Those that have never had a child die speak the truth when they say, "I can't imagine what you're going through." There are no words that can fully express that gut-wrenching anguish and sorrow a parent feels searing through their mind, body and spirit when they are told their child is dead.

Having those very words spoken to my husband, Dan, and me on July 21, 1985, I can attest to that shattering of my heart and world. Yet with Kristen's 25th 'anniversary' soon approaching I would like to share a few of my grief journey 'learnings' and how they helped me move toward 'healing my fractured heart.' Because parental grief is unique and individual and based on various factors, my experiences may not match other bereaved parents' grief journeys, but hopefully something will resonate that may help a parent move beyond barely surviving your child's death to living once again with love and joy ~ albeit differently ~ and in your own time and way.

The Death of a Child is not something to 'get over'

A parent's grief process is a lifelong journey and not a one-time event that is over at the magical one-year anniversary. Your child grows up in your mind and with each missed milestone depending on the age of their death (ie., learning to walk, starting school, getting married, having children, having a successful career etc), you will recycle your present loss along with past losses of every kind within the context of your own personality, your role in the family, and other present stressors, just to name a few factors. Grief will impact every aspect of your being spiritually, emotionally, physically, cognitively and socially and each aspect will need to be processed over and over again in order to integrate it within your life and your family's life – but you will NEVER get 'over it!'

Grief is not a step-by-step linear process

Dr Elisabeth Kübler-Ross never intended her grief theory to be taken so literally, generalized across all loss and grief, and have it cemented as a process that moves from higher intensity denial, anger, bargaining and depression to a final acceptance and peace at being back to 'normal.' Unfortunately, many still view grief that way and it causes major complications for those trying to do their own 'grief work.' There is no cookie-cutter approach or right way to learning to live without your child's physical presence. Working through any anger, guilt, grief depression, etc, can feel like you're on a spiraling rollercoaster tossing you forward and back, up and down and feeling as if it will never end ~ it is not an easy, fast or predictable process. The age of your child, circumstances surrounding the death, your relationship with your child, etc will be different for every parent ~ so don't expect your process to follow the same path and in the same timeframe. Going with the flow of your own personal journey and giving yourself that permission to take what fits for you and disregard the rest is vital.

Going around grief is not an option

No parent ever wants to cope with a child's death, but in reality it happens every day around the world ~ children die. You ask yourself "How am I ever going to go on?" Unfortunately, there is no way around grief – one must go through it in order for 'healing' or reconciliation and integration within your life to occur. Those early on in this process may not see 'healing' or integration as even possible dimensions right now ~ I understand that all too well ~ but 'healing' is possible, yet it's often felt long AFTER it's actually begun and then continues down the long winding road of life. Over time and a lot of grief work, one is able to move outside of oneself, moving beyond survival to living again. As posed in many

grief books the question before you is “Do I become bitter or better?” ~ the choice is yours. From my own personal experience, one CAN live their life with renewed faith, hope and love!

Grief is Intergenerational

What we learn about death and coping with loss as a child in our family-of-origin, in our spiritual/religious and school communities, and from other significant people and environments in our lives impacts how we process our own child's death. For many families their grief goes underground because talking about death is taboo and the topic becomes the 'elephant in the room' ~ everyone sees it but doesn't acknowledge it or express how they feel or what it means to them. Some may dive into work or try to numb themselves through alcohol, but that only delays, prolongs and complicates an already complicated process. Just because you learned to 'stuff' your grief as a child doesn't mean you have to do that as an adult in the present and future. You have a choice and change can be part of that choice. As difficult as it is to do, you do have the power to forge your own way of 'healing' in a healthier and more constructive way. And I hope all children today learn that lesson early on in their own lives!

Ongoing Support is Vital

Family, friends and co-workers often don't know what to say or do around bereaved parents. The unthinkable has happened and much of their uncomfortable feelings come from knowing it could have been them! And oftentimes, after awhile many think you should be further along in your grief than you are - based on that false idea that there's truly a set timeline and destination to grief - that is why Ongoing Support is so very important for parents and their families. Being able to share your pain, as well as your joy (and yes one CAN laugh in the midst of grief), with another bereaved parent, a support group, a clergy, or anyone that you trust with your innermost thoughts and feelings is vital - someone that will listen with compassion and an open heart without judging your process or telling you to move forward in your life before YOU are ready.

Our children live within us Forever

When we love someone, grief is a fact of life and living. When a child dies, we may feel as if the grief is insurmountable, yet just because your child is not physically present doesn't mean they aren't 'here.' Having experienced my own spiritual awakenings and 'love messages' from my daughter I KNOW Kristen will always be with me. Being open to experiencing Divine synchronicity and grace is not limited to those that practice a specific religion, however - it can occur with anyone open to 'healing' one's heart and spirit.

I hope this brief article on my 'learnings' will validate some of what you as a grieving parent may be going through ~ and that you have others in your life that will allow you to grieve in your own way and in your own time ~ moving you toward celebrating your child's life with renewed meaning and purpose in your own life.

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