How does a family heal after losing a child?

A few weeks ago, I lost my child to a terminal illness. The pain feels unbearable, and some days it hits in waves that leave me unable to function. I wake up hoping it was just a nightmare, but reality quickly returns. I do not even know what healing looks like after losing a child because it feels like a part of my soul has been taken away. I also have three other children who still need me, but I often feel guilty. Sometimes I worry that my grief makes me distant from them, yet when I try to carry on normal routines, I feel like I am betraying the child I lost. My husband and I also seem to grieve differently. I want to talk about our child, while he withdraws. It feels like we are drifting apart when we should be supporting each other. How do I carry this grief while still being a mother and partner? **Sarah**

Dear Sarah,

Parents generally expect to outlive their children. When this natural order is disrupted by the death of a child, it profoundly impacts not only life but also identity, purpose, and feelings of safety in the world. Losing a child creates a unique and deep wound; it is not just grief; it is a significant rupture in the fabric of life. You do not simply "get over it"; instead, you learn to carry it differently.

Being a parent becomes a fundamental part of who you are. When a child dies, future dreams vanish. As parents, you grieve not only for the child you lost but also for the life you envisioned together; the birthdays, graduations, and the future milestones you anticipated witnessing. Almost nothing will feel normal again.

Grief does not adhere to any set rules. You and your partner may experience it in entirely different ways. One of you might feel overwhelmed with emotion, while the other becomes quiet or withdrawn. You may encounter overwhelming sadness, numbness, anger, or hopelessness, all at once.

This does not mean something is wrong; it simply reflects the depth of your love for your child. Be prepared for waves of emotion. One day, you might feel stable, while the next day could bring devastation. Anniversaries, holidays, or even ordinary days can reopen the wound. Sometimes, surviving means taking it one moment at a time, and that is perfectly okay.

Many parents grapple with guilt, even when such feelings are not rational. You may feel that you were meant to protect your child but could not. Daily life may have once revolved around your child, so their absence can feel like a loss of purpose and routine within your family. This pain can feel isolating and may challenge your beliefs about fairness, life, God, and the world.

There is no guidebook for making the loss of a child bearable in the way we often expect. You do not simply overcome it; you endure, breathe, and gradually learn to live alongside the grief. As a couple, it is vital to allow each other the space to grieve in your own ways. You do not always have to be strong for each other. There will be times when one of you falls apart and the other provides support, and times when those roles will reverse.

Due to the intensity of the pain, grieving parents often feel isolated. Others may struggle with knowing what to say or might unintentionally say hurtful things, such as suggesting that you can have another child. It is important to let people into your lives at your own pace or to establish boundaries when you need space. Both choices are entirely valid.

Grief is a heavy burden. At times, you may feel as though you are reliving the same painful day repeatedly. While time will not erase the loss, it may soften the sharpest edges of the pain. There is no timeline for grief, and neither of you should feel pressured to heal quickly. Be patient with yourselves and with each other.

Taking care of your physical and emotional well-being is crucial, even when it feels challenging. Try to maintain simple routines, such as eating regularly, resting, and getting fresh air. Activities that once brought you comfort, such as walking, reading, spending time in nature, or engaging in quiet hobbies, can provide small moments of stability during this upheaval.

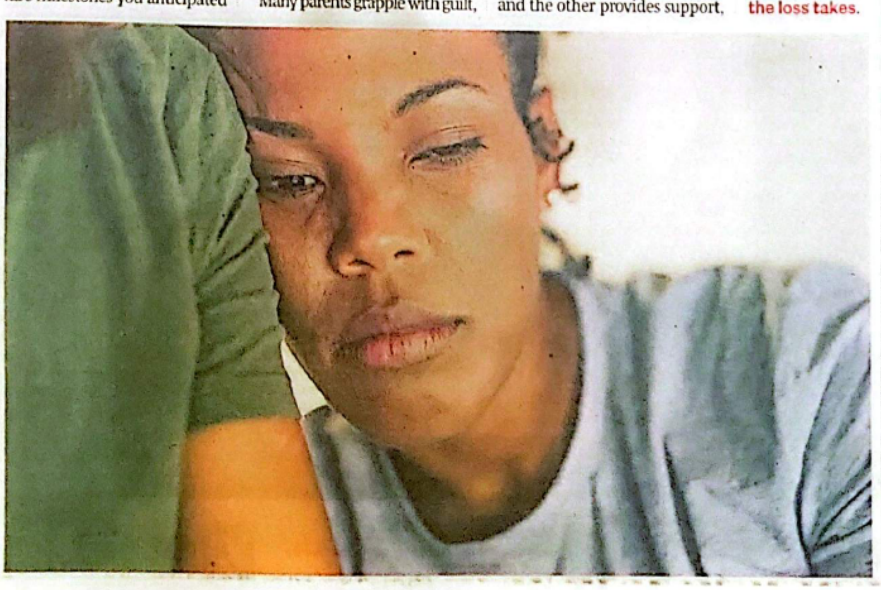
Finding ways to express your grief can also be beneficial. Some parents find relief in journaling their thoughts, even if they are just scattered ideas. Writing letters to your child, sharing memories, or recording dreams you once had for them can create space for emotions that are difficult to express verbally.

It is important not to compare your grief with others. Every parent processes loss differently. One of you may need to talk frequently about your child, while the other might prefer to process the loss more privately. Neither approach is wrong.

As you feel ready, continue to recognise that life exists alongside your grief. This does not mean forgetting your child. It means allowing yourselves to grow around the loss while carrying your child's memory with you. Speak your child's name, share stories, and remember the joy they brought into your lives.

Seeking support can also make a significant difference. Grief counselling, therapy, or support groups for parents who have experienced a similar loss can offer a safe space to discuss your pain openly. Being with others who understand the depth of such a loss can help mitigate the sense of loneliness.

In time, some parents find comfort in honouring their child's memory in meaningful ways. This might involve volunteering, or engaging in activities that reflect the love and values your child brought into your life.



72%

Divorce rates. Studies show that the death of a child can place significant strain on a marriage, but the impact is often misunderstood. Research indicates that about 12 to 16 percent of couples divorce after the loss of a child, a figure far lower than the commonly repeated myth that 80 to 90 percent of marriages end after such a tragedy. In fact, one survey found that around 72 percent of couples who were married when their child died remained together later, suggesting that many relationships endure despite the profound grief.

However, while most couples stay together, the experience can still put considerable pressure on a relationship. Studies show that bereaved parents face a higher risk of divorce compared to parents who have not lost a child, highlighting the emotional toll the loss takes.

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Pearl Baine
Grief Counsellor

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