

THE DEATH OF A CHILD – A PARENT’S CHOICE FOR LIFE

On the trauma of losing a child

It was a normal Monday morning. I had been on the telephone for the previous hour, taking calls from my patients, dealing with their questions, booking in new appointments, the usual administration of a busy homeopathic practice. I was just settling down to a refreshing cup of tea when the telephone rang again. This time it was my daughter. She was so distraught, she could hardly speak. Stammering through her tears, she finally shared her shocking news: “He’s dead, Eilifur is dead. He was killed this morning, in an accident at work.” Her twin bother Eilifur, my beautiful 26 year old son, working on a special construction project in Iceland, had just been killed. My world stopped. Every fibre of my being screamed out: “No, this cannot be true.” My body shook: I wanted to scream but no voice came, tears blinded my eyes. It couldn’t be true: Eilifur was the most vibrant, life-affirming young man that I knew. How could he be dead?

Somehow, I managed to drive to my daughter’s home, where I heard the whole story. Yes, it was shockingly true. The unthinkable had happened; every parent’s worst nightmare. The next hours passed in a dazed blur: internet, plane tickets, car travel, airports, flights. All done with little awareness of what was happening.

When we landed in Iceland, the wind was howling; a fierce, bitterly cold wind that almost knocked us over. It felt as though Thor himself, the ancient god of thunder, was raging in the heavens, furious at how the natural order had been overturned.

The days and weeks that followed were a mix of tears, anger, blame, numbness, disbelief, and fury, as we dealt with autopsies, funeral, and all the surreal trappings of the end of life. And the shocking realisation that although my family’s life had been changed irrevocably, the rest of the world carried on as before.

For months afterward, it felt as if the veils between the world of the living and the dead had dissolved. The pull from the world beyond was almost irresistible, calling out to me to follow Eilifur.

Only thoughts of my daughter and regular use of homeopathic remedies kept me on the planet.

»» I do not have words to express the sorrow or the loss I felt. It left a hole in my heart that can never be filled. ««

Nelson Mandela after the death of his son

When I finally returned to my homeopathic practice, I found that my experiences had blessed me with a new level of understanding and empathy for my patients. Not surprisingly, many new patients came to me dealing with the awful heartbreak of the loss of a child. These died through miscarriage, stillbirth, cot death, disease, accidents, drug overdoses, violence, and suicide. But all had one thing in common – their parents felt that the pain was so overwhelming that they would not be able to survive it.

Almost all these bereaved parents also shared a deep, painful sense of their grief not having been understood, either by friends, family members, medical professionals or therapists, and the extraordinary isolation they experienced as a result. I write this article in the hope that it can bring greater understanding to our profession, to share the unique “blessing” that my bereaved patients and I have received – a trauma beyond any other – and to share the enormous potential for healing that it offers, especially when supported by a skilful and conscious practitioner.

»» A wife who loses her husband is called a widow.
A husband who loses his wife is called a widower.
A child who loses his parents is called an orphan.
But ... there is no word for a parent
who loses a child, that’s how awful the loss is! ««

Neugeboren, 1976

THE JOURNEY THROUGH LOSS

Dealing with parental grief is a complex and multi-layered process. The death of a child, at any age, is an incredibly traumatic event (“a catastrophic stressor” – DSM IV), leaving parents with

overwhelming emotional needs. These must be acknowledged and felt in their intensity. Dealing with this involves deep pain and ongoing work; a long and painful process, a lifetime process. It is vital that the therapist understands this: you do not “get over” the death of a child.

»» When your parent dies you have lost your past. When your child dies you have lost your future. ««

Dr. Elliot Luby

The following are the most common parental reactions I have seen to the loss of a child:

- Acute feelings of anguish and pain - a sense that these will last for ever; that their identity has been lost in pain.
- Acute physical feelings – numbness; lack of energy; loss of appetite, libido; palpitations; headaches; amenorrhoea.
- Acute emotional feelings: bewilderment; inability to concentrate; numbness; anger; horror; disbelief; intense fear; nightmares; hyper-vigilance; deep hurt.
- Loss of hope and dreams; disillusionment; suicidal feelings.
- Not being able or wanting to cope; withdrawal from life.
- GUILT - possibly the most crippling state of all. As a parent, your job is to protect your own child; it’s your fault.
- Powerlessness - if you haven’t been able to protect your child, what can you do in life?

In the current version of *The Complete Repertory*, there are 203 remedies listed under the Grief rubric. It is worth familiarising yourself with all of these, in the light of the above symptoms but also worth keeping in mind that the biggest challenge here for the practitioner, and the greatest gift you can give your grieving patient, is not finding the “right” remedy but how present you can be with them on their journey: being homeopathic



EILIFUR HAMMOND

Declan Hammond’s son Eilifur died at the age of just 26 following an accident at work.

to them, not just prescribing homeopathically.

Major grief is the biggest aetiology for the whole spectrum of chronic disease (there is a hugely increased incidence of cancer and heart disease within three years of bereavement).

MARRIAGE AND RELATIONSHIPS

Losing a child robs parents of what they love most, isolates partners from each other, deafens them so

they cannot hear the cries of their other children, and breaks the bonds of friendship and community.

»» You would have thought that Orla’s death would have brought us closer together. Instead, it drove us apart. It was like we couldn’t reach each other across the gulf of loss. ««

A mother, after the death of her four-year-old daughter

Up to 90% of all bereaved couples are in serious marital difficulty within months of the death of their child. This is often a considerable, unforeseen shock which, when added to the trauma of bereavement, can bring parents and their relationship to a breaking point. As with the mother above, the expectation is usually that the previous, loving relationship will support the couple through their pain. However, the reality is often the opposite of this: men and women typically grieve differently, there are different expectations, and their “happy ever after” fantasy has been shattered.

There are often arguments about whether to discuss or not to discuss the loss, whether or not to close off memories of the child. One partner is often blamed for the death. Solace is often found outside the marriage, in affairs; emotional and sexual withdrawal is also common.

» Everyone must carry his own mourning. It is something that cannot be shared. Do not make demands of comfort from your mate when he is feeling the same pain you feel. Recognise that she would help if she could. You must content yourself with this if you want your marriage to survive. «

Sarnoff-Schiff

GRIEVING MOTHERS

While everyone has their own unique way of handling grief, I have found that there are certain general patterns that I see bereaved mothers present with in my practice.

- Mothers will frequently verbalise and cry their way through their grief (they will often receive the most support due to this).
- There is often an over-sensitivity towards not getting their needs met, often leading to them cutting themselves off.
- Taking care of others to the detriment of their own grief is also common.
- Mothers often become big carriers of guilt.
- They frequently lose confidence in their own mortality, health, and their ability to mother their other children.

» This space is with me all the time it seems. Sometimes, the empty space is so real I can almost touch it. I can almost see it. It gets so big sometimes that I can't see anything else. «

Gemma, 10 years after the death of her daughter

GRIEVING FATHERS

Again, this is generalised but I have found that fathers have quite different ways of managing their grief.

- They often think their way through grief and are unwilling/unable to talk about it (often interpreted as not caring).
- They are often the forgotten grievers.
- There are considerable demands on fathers to "be strong".
- Feels a failure as the "protector" for the dead child. Fears failure to protect his family in future.
- Often uses work, sport, or activity to keep grief at bay.
- Drink/drugs are frequently used as a means to "cope".

» A My heart was broken when Ronan died. You never expect to outlive your children. He was such a lively wee fellow. Then just gone. I miss him every day, even after all this time. But Mary (wife) thinks I don't care because I can't talk about it. The pain is too deep «

John, 10 years after the death of his son

HELPFUL RESPONSES

- Understand that each parent has their own way of experiencing and expressing grief.
- There are no timescales or "shoulds" in grief.
- Be available to accept the parent as they are and to listen and empathise deeply. Do not try to minimise their grief.
- Allow them to express or not express themselves, at their own pace.
- Help them to feel they are not alone, they are not going mad, and that grief involves a huge range of physical symptoms and emotions.
- Help them find their own unique coping strategy. Everything is not "fine". Encourage truth-speaking, honesty.
- A child's death is different from any other loss; it must be viewed as such and not compared to other losses (such as the loss of parent, spouse, friend or pet).
- It is essential for healing that the dead child is discussed (bereaved families are often deserted due to awkwardness or embarrassment).
- Remember the dead as they were and do not idealise them.
- What has happened is the ultimate tragedy. Do not let everything around die too.
- Be aware of the power of significant dates (birthday, anniversary and holidays) and their ability to re-traumatise the bereaved.
- Encourage involvement with other bereaved parents.
- Parents need to know that they will survive.

Remember that bereaved parents need continued support, not just in the first months. Their distress and pain is often far more acute after the initial shock wears off.

Grieving patterns are usually set during the early stages of grieving, the weakest and most vulnerable time. It is important to support the bereaved in learning how to roll with the waves of grief, until it is time for the first conscious step out of the cocoon of mourning.

» My biggest fear when I was horrified and frozen was that it would always be like this. What if the pain never stopped? «

Harriet

PLEASURE

Strange as it may seem, a major "obstacle to cure" for the bereaved is the inability to accept pleasure: "How can I laugh when my child is dead?"

Enjoyment is one of the most important tools for survival that we possess. Bereaved parents, however, will often find themselves

feeling guilty, either during or after enjoyment. There is often a sense of loss with the enjoyment; not being able to share it with the dead child. Over-indulgence can also be used as an escape from the pain.

With gentle and appropriate encouragement, pleasure can be welcomed back and the healing process powerfully supported.

THE JOURNEY HOME

» The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain. «

Khalil Gibran

When I first read these words many years ago, I thought them very strange. In the years after my son's death, I slowly realised the profound homeopathic truth of the poet's words. Moving deeper in my own healing and witnessing many courageous patients doing likewise, I became aware of the enormous potential for growth and development that becomes available when such grief is transformed.

My patients speak of: "lives changed utterly"; "opening to a bigger reality"; "understanding what's really important in life"; "increased compassion and empathy"; "greater capacity for love"; "becoming focussed on now"; "spirit becoming personalised"; "questioning of belief systems"; "discarding old, outmoded beliefs"; "a choice to truly live"; "being no longer afraid of death".

THOSE WHO ARE NEAR DO NOT KNOW

» Those who are near do not know that you are nearer to me than they are. Those who speak to me do not know that my heart is full with your unspoken words. Those who crowd in my path do not know that I am walking alone with you. Those who love me do not know that their love brings you to my heart «

Rabindranath Tagore after the death of his son

As I struggled vainly to find meaning in my own journey, the only helpful metaphor I found was that of an initiation:

» Initiation liberates man from profane time and history; reveals the deep meaning of existence; reveals a world open to the trans-human, the transcendental; opens the initiate to spiritual values. «

Mircea Eliade

Supporting bereaved patients through such a challenge requires courage, dedication, and understanding. I hope that my experience, as shared here, will prove useful in facilitating these initiations and bring great satisfaction and rewards to all concerned.

THE WELL OF GRIEF

Those who will not slip beneath the still water on the well of grief

turning downward through its black water to the place we cannot breathe

will never know the source from which we drink, the secret water, cold and clear,

nor find in the darkness glimmering the small round coins thrown by those who wished for something else.

David Whyte



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