

Supporting parents after bereavement

Living with no surviving children



What helped us...

Living with no surviving children

“I must live on so that I do not leave a legacy of ‘my life falling apart’. My children’s memory deserves better and so do I.”
Bereaved Parent

Introduction

To lose your only child (or your children) is unimaginable. It is devastating. The silence is deafening. At first, breathing in and out is hard. It feels like life is over.

We have lost our child, our family unit, our daily routines and our dreams. We feel empty. There is this gap between us and the rest of the world. We question if we can possibly have a future. Going to bed at night we feel like screaming; all we want to do is shut down.

We have been there too. We wrote this leaflet so that you know you are not alone. We have experienced the pain and despair, the dark thoughts and anger, and the fear. We will not pretty it up – it is hell. But, we have come to know that the fact that our child (children) has (have) lived is so much more important than their death. Their death does not define them. Holding on to that, we live on. You can too.

Life goes on after the loss of your only child or children – not the way you wanted or pictured it, but it goes on. There are experiences which are devastating and experiences that give you some comfort, but

from each one you learn more about yourself and how to keep your relationship with your child (children) alive.

In this leaflet we offer ways that some of us found helpful to get through this awful time. We hope you will get even one thing from this leaflet that you find helpful.

What helped us in the early days

“Loads of time, no plans and nothing matters.”

We all react differently when we lose our only child (our children). Some of us:

- felt like we had been thrown out of a train in the middle of nowhere in a foreign land,
- felt overwhelmed and helpless and didn't know what to do or where to go,
- let our own health suffer, and
- pushed family and friends away as we were so angry.

It is natural to react in different ways and we offer the following points as some of them helped us in the early days after our child (children) died.

Do what works for you

You might want to be on your own or you might want to talk. You will know best. If you feel that you need to talk, have somebody you can call – a supportive friend or family member – who will just listen without trying to ‘fix’ you or make the situation better!

If you don’t want to talk, nominate a friend or a close relative who can keep people at a distance until you feel you are up to talking to them.

Managing anger

There may be times when you feel angry. Different people will have different triggers, so try to know yours. This will help you to manage your anger. If you don’t manage your anger, then it can hurt you and others.

“Some people, even those closest to us, say the most insensitive things. In time you see it coming and learn to let it go.”

What do you do when you feel angry?

1. Watch for signs of anger. Breathe in more than you breathe out – this will help. Many of us do regular exercise – as this clears our head.
2. Avoid drinking too much alcohol or taking drugs. It doesn’t help as you will still need to deal with your anger at some point.
3. Try not to dwell on insensitive comments – or actions. They don’t deserve your energy.

“[Even when I am with other bereaved parents, I] hate when they say they would not still be here if they didn’t have other children, ‘cause we had only one and have to be still here!!!”

4. If you need professional help to manage your anger, get it. There are experienced professionals who can help you through these emotions – seek them out.

Keep things that represent the bond with your child

It can be hard to know what to do with your child’s room. Do you clear it out or leave it? Listen to your instincts. Some people like to leave the door of their child’s room open. Some don’t.

Talk and agree with your partner (if you have one) about the room. Try not to rush into doing something that you may regret later.

If you do choose to give away things, keep items that reflect your connection with your child (children).

Be active

In the early days, it may feel like you are existing but not living. We found any physical activity at all can help. If it is too difficult to go for a walk locally (meeting neighbours), you might travel a little to a quiet place or even walk around your garden.

“I used to get up at six every morning for my daily ‘walk of sorrow’. I don’t have to do that anymore, though I couldn’t tell you when, how or why I came to stop. Change comes when we are ready for it and not before.”

Give yourself space

We found it was good to have your own space – somewhere where you can be with your grief. For example, a room, a walking route, a place in the local park.

This space can help you accept the reality of what has happened. It can help you live in a way that honours the life and memory of your child (children).

"[I make sure that I] acknowledge with deep gratitude the gift of our son's living presence in our lives. This gift of the precious time we had with our son is something that I keep to the forefront of my thinking."

Find ways of coping with difficult people or situations

Sometimes we found that some people made it difficult for us to re-establish our lives. We are identified as the Mam or Dad whose only child or children died.

Sometimes there are assumptions that you might have to deal with.

"There is an assumption that we don't want anything to do with other children... We are not contagious."

We may find ourselves being with children at parties or gatherings, and the moment can be weighed down by other people's assumption that it is difficult for us. They do not see that we may just want to enjoy holding and playing with a child. We need to brace ourselves against these assumptions. We need to find ways of letting people know this is something we want to do. It could be as simple as saying 'this brings back lovely memories', giving you a chance to talk about those special memories.

It can sometimes be difficult when you are with parents talking about their children.

"It is tough when you hear other parents worrying about their child. What I wouldn't give for something that made me anxious in the past... a 'bold' note from school...!"

Sometimes, it can also be hard at work.

"In work everyone can be talking about their children... they forget what you have experienced and if you recount something from your child's life the conversation closes down."

The following may help you get through these challenges.

Dealing with uncomfortable questions

People can be nosy and often ask tough questions such as how many children do you have or what did your child (children) die of. We know they don't mean any harm but it can be tough. What can you do?

One thing we have found is that whatever answer you give is the right answer for you. We have the choice to introduce our child (children) to people – or not. You may need to get to know and trust an individual before you introduce your child (children) to them. Do they deserve to be introduced to your child (children)? Or, do we adopt the approach one parent describes below?

"Out of necessity I evolved an abruptness laced with a ferocious black humour. When they ask me 'what did she die of' and I don't want to tell them, I say: 'She died of a Saturday'. That usually stops them in their tracks."

Other times, you may wish to speak about your child but you are worried about making others feel uncomfortable. You might think it out this

way - if your answer makes (a) the questioner feel bad for two minutes, or (b) you feel bad for the rest of the day – choose (a).

Society doesn't understand how you would, could or should function. People want a 'They all lived happily ever after' ending. You may also be asked about fostering, adoption... you will get used to stopping these conversations.

Surround yourself with people that matter, with people that can help. Try and avoid people who, with the best will in the world, bring you down and leave you empty.

Questions we may ask ourselves

- Who am I now without my child?
- Am I still a Mammy or Daddy?
- How do we mark birthdays and other milestones?

These questions will be with you for some time. It's true that our parenting role and all the normal routines that went with that role are gone now. Our weekly shop has changed dramatically. We no longer have to drop and collect our child from their various activities. However, we can find a 'new normal' and a way to keep the connection with our child (children). We can do things in our child or children's memory, in particular around the tough milestones.

Setting boundaries is also important

"In the early days, we often found ourselves entertaining in our dressing gowns."

There is a need to set boundaries. Some of us had people arriving at the door unannounced and staying for hours. This can

be trying and tiring, though shorter visits can help. It depends on how you feel.

Not answering the door is one way of dealing with this or saying you are about to go out when they arrive. You can bring visits to a close when you want to. You don't have to give an excuse. People should understand.

Find your coping mechanism and keep doing it

You can find a ritual or activity that helps you cope, no matter how bizarre or unexpected. If it works for you, keep doing it. Some of the rituals we found helpful were:

- lighting a candle,
- creating a special place in the garden,
- doing creative writing or arts and crafts,
- writing down your daily thoughts, feelings and emotions to ease your mind,
- visiting places that bring peace or hold special memories,
- going to our child's room or grave, and
- fundraising in your child or children's memory.

Build a support network

Some of us have lost friends after our child (children) died. They ran from us or we pushed them away. It can happen.

Some of us have found it useful to build up a support network but remember:

"You need to choose well who will accompany you. I didn't choose this journey and along the way I probably kicked many off my bus. We need the right people on our bus."

Remember that our children are still teaching us

Think of what your child or children would say or do in situations. This can help. They could often see the humour in situations that frustrate us and thinking about their response might help you to get through a situation better.

Talk and grieve with your partner

Those of us who have partners feel it a help to have them, though we often find ourselves grieving differently. This is normal as our relationship with our child or children was also different.

"Men and women have different coping styles. One wants just the bullet points while the other needs to tell the story."

It helps to acknowledge and accept that our partner in life may be a private griever and not want to take part in things that the other might find helpful or a comfort.

"The women will say men shut down but we just have our own way. I never cried in front of my wife but I remember I'd shower a couple of times a day and I'd cry there and hide the tears – 'I do my crying in the rain.'"

Getting through as time goes on

Be aware that there will be times when you are ambushed by grief. You could be having a 'good day' and suddenly feel overwhelmed, but it will pass.

Keep talking

If you have a partner, listen to each other or just be together if there are no words. You will be each other's source of strength through this difficult time.

There is nothing wrong with thoughts about trying for another child or adopting a child at some point. Trust yourself to know what feels right.

If you find someone compassionate and you trust and feel comfortable with them, talk to them about how you are feeling and about your child or children, who are still a huge part of our lives.

Some of us got professional help. Some found it useful as the counsellor was unconnected to us. They will try their best to listen and support, but they won't have all the answers.

Consider meeting up with other parents who have experienced the death of their only child or children, but who may be a little bit further on in their grieving than you are at this moment. They will understand what you are going through, as they are on a similar journey.

Remember your child's life

Our children's deaths do not define them. Some of us have found it helpful to remember all the good times we had with our child/children.

"When I think of my daughter, I want to be celebrating her life, rather than being reminded of her death."

Our time with our children has been limited but remembered. Try to think not about what your child could have been but rather who he or she was.

Finding ways to connect with our child's (or children's) memory and furthering their legacy has helped us all. Memories will not always be so painful, so tinged with anger, guilt or regret.

"I feel the need to write down memories but don't know what to do with them yet."

"At first we want to run from the memories, later we want to run and hug them."

Develop a new relationship

Some of us have developed a new relationship with our child (children) and this has helped.

"I was thankful to be able to see the possibility of a new relationship with our son, despite his physical absence."

"I still have a relationship with my daughter who died; it's just different. I know I will carry her in my heart forever."

Talk to others

Some of us have found it helpful to find people who let us talk about our child. Seek them out. These are the people who will mention and remember our child. More people will do so than you can believe – even when it seems that everyone has 'moved on'. You never know when you'll hear 'the unexpected story'; one that you'd never heard before.

Remind others and remember together

Text friends and family to think of your child on the relevant day and to remember them in whatever way they would like.

"To mark his confirmation, we had his baptismal candle lit in the church. The children in his class each painted a stone with their confirmation name on it and placed them around the grave along with a wreath they made. It was hugely comforting."

Take care of yourself and your partner

"We are challenged to turn the energy we invested in our children towards them living right and well, to now turn this energy towards ourselves to try and live as good and healthy a life as possible."

This can be done by:

- Keeping busy
- Taking time to grieve
- Being kind to yourself
- Respecting your partner's grief
- Asking for and accepting help
- Getting enough sleep
- Talking about your child
- Making time for your own healing

You can decide

We have a choice: to close down, or to live in the legacy of our children. We say 'choice' but that doesn't mean it's a conscious decision. It takes time and may be happening before you realise it.

There is a longing to be able to give to our child, and eventually we can find ways to do so.

"To honour them, we re-invest in life."

Our priorities may change, and we with them. We can find ourselves reviewing our life and leaving things go that are not important. This can be a positive.

"We can't live our lives through our children, but we discover new ways of going on living our lives because of them."

Anam Cara is an all-Ireland organisation providing online and face-to-face peer support services to bereaved parents. The death of a child of any age and through any circumstances is devastating.

Everyone in the family will deal differently with their grief and may need different types of support. Initially that support will be your extended family, friends or a professional.

However, as time passes, know that groups like Anam Cara are available to provide a safe and comfortable place for you to access information and speak to other bereaved parents.

Visit our website to view the Anam Cara Information Videos, with bereaved parents interviewed on themes such as 'A Dad's Grief' and 'Sudden and Traumatic Death'. You may also find the other leaflets in the Anam Cara Information Pack to be helpful, and there are further resources on our website for parents with no surviving children.

Anam Cara would like to thank all the parents who contributed to this leaflet.



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