

Grief: Coping with the death of a child

by Jessica Myles

Helping a Friend Whose Child Has Died

A child's death is the most devastating of all deaths. Other deaths are difficult, but they are not unexpected. In the back of your mind you've thought about the possibility of your mother and father dying. You know your grandparents are going to die before you. But a child's death is unnatural. It's unexpected even if the child has been sick for some time. It's impossible to prepare psychologically for it. When it happens, all of your friend's dreams come to an abrupt halt. All hope is lost. His heart feels like someone is holding it with a death grip on it. She has nothing left to live for. His life is over. Nothing anyone says can make it any easier. Nothing can ease this pain.

You want to help, but you don't know how. What you say may be more discouraging than encouraging. The last thing you want to do is hurt your friend even more. So what do you say? What don't you say?

Don't say "You're still young. You can have another child someday." That may be true, but another child will not replace the one that died. Another child won't relieve the pain. And the thought of bringing another child into this world is excruciating because the possibility of losing another one is too much to bear.

Don't say "Well, at least you had the child for x number of years." There is no time that this is an appropriate statement because there is never a good time for your child to die. Parents are supposed to die first. Period!

Don't say "I know how you feel" or "I can just imagine what you are going through". Unless you have been through the death of your child, you cannot imagine what they're going through. Even if you were close to the child the parent may be hurt by a comment like this one.

Don't say "The child is in heaven now". When a parent is grieving it doesn't matter where that child is. All that matters is that the child is not HERE!

Don't say "It was God's time". The parent will in turn blame God for taking the child from them. They will not be able to comprehend how God could "time" the death of their child so poorly. They will not be able to understand why God would want them to go through so much pain.

Don't say "This will all work out for the good". There is nothing more painful than the death of your child. When a parent is grieving, they don't comprehend "good". They feel that nothing is good anymore because their child isn't here.

Don't say "You can do this because God won't put on you more than you can bear". They can't bear it.

They are devastated beyond words and they do not see an end to this pain and suffering. All they know is that they can't take this much longer. There is no way to cope with this pain. They take life one day at a time. This, too, can lead them blaming God.

Don't ask when they are going to clean out the child's room. If they bring it up, support them and help them. They will clean out the room when they are ready. It may be a slow process, so just be there for them.

Don't ask when they are going to put pictures away or bring them back out. Some parents want pictures of the child around, others don't. Don't push the issue one way or the other. Just go with the flow.

So, what can you say? Say nothing. Be there for them. Support them. Listen to them. If they talk about the child and memories then feel free to reminisce together. If they don't talk about the child, remain silent.

How can you help? Learn to read your friend's moods. Some days conversations about the child will come easily. Other days, talking about it will be torturous. They may be "fine" one day and the next day they may be a basket case. In some cases, a parent's mood may change from one minute to the next. Be aware of your friend's body language. Your friend may be going through life and all of a sudden see something that reminds them of the child and break down in tears. Don't be surprised if that happens.

Stick around! That may sound strange, but so many people come to the funeral and offer support for the first week or two and then disappear. Your friend is going to need you most once everyone else is gone. During the first week or two, your friend was pretty much oblivious to her surroundings. Reality is going to hit, and hit hard. Your friend is going to need you then more than ever. Be there for him. You might also research some grieving parent self-help groups in your area. Contact them and ask for more helpful tips. Your friend can make it through this with your help.