

Coping with the Death of an Only Child / All Children

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Having a child die is the ultimate grief that any parent will ever encounter. Having one's only child or all children die compounds that ultimate grief to the point of being unthinkable for most people in our society today.

People often ask how one can possibly survive when all of our children are deceased. Most bereaved parents wonder that same thing for several years. Surely we will die. There is no way we can survive, let alone actually LIVE when all our children are gone before us. Some have shared that they actually spent all of their resources only to find themselves financially depressed years later when they realized that no matter how much they willed themselves to die they were still on this earth.

Now childless bereaved parents endure a similar grieving process as those bereaved parents with surviving children. But, the difference begins when we realize that there will never be grandchildren, no one to celebrate the holidays, milestones in life, or be there for us as we age. Days, weeks, and months pass with no phone calls, visits, cards, letters or interaction from family unless we, the bereaved parent, takes the initiative.

Now childless bereaved parents have extreme difficulty with holidays and special events. Some of us are fortunate to have friends or extended family members who think to include us in special times or holidays but some are left to spend all those days and nights totally alone. Most of us have learned to 'entertain' others so that we are not left alone for those special times.

We have had several occasions in our lives in the past few years that have made us acutely aware of being childless. We had to ask our minister to be at the hospital when my husband had his heart catheterization a few years ago as most

people just do not think about those of us with no children.

Our country home was in the midst of a tornado seven years ago. Fortunately Rodney's boss came to our rescue and helped him patch up some windows that evening so we could be secure until the next day when we could get some contracting help. Others used the excuse that they did not know or thought we were o.k. as the phone rang and no one answered. Unfortunately the phone never rang at our house as all lines were down. Seven of our neighbors lost everything in that tornado and we had lots of damage but no one was there to see what we needed.

Recently we moved from the country into town. We moved ourselves except for the heavy furniture which we had to ask for help. People just do not think, as they have children to assist them and it never occurs to them that just maybe you could use some help. I had three lady friends that helped me organize some cupboards and wallpaper. But, we had to ask for help when it came to moving the heavy pieces of furniture.

We have always initiated relationships with our deceased daughter's friends, nieces and nephews but sometimes one just gets tired and we think it may just be easier to forget it. There are some now childless parents who do not have the luxury of having ANY family or friends nearby and are truly alone.

We learn to adjust to being childless and make friends with others who have had a similar experience to us. Some of us with no children get together during special holidays or visit each other during the year. There is a special bond/understanding that need not be spoken. Other bereaved parents understand this unspoken bond as only those who 'walk in our shoes' can truly understand.

Now childless parents realize that we must plan for our future and see that all financial, medical and business matters are secure and settled long before the time arrives when we will need assistance. What do we do with our precious mementos that belonged to our deceased child or 'things' that are important to us and our heritage? Will anyone ever care enough to want any of this or take care of it? I am reminded of a story of a man who had much of his personal estate auctioned off along with an OLD photo that was of his deceased son. No one realized the importance of this photo. In his will he had specified that whoever thought enough to purchase the photo would receive quite a large inheritance. Interesting concept ????

Usually some of our relatives, friends or children of friends care enough to want some of those 'things' that are so precious to us. Also, as we age and life's values change we begin to realize that those 'things' are not what matters anyway. What we do with our life and how we manage to keep our children's memories alive by helping others are really what is more important than worrying about what is going to happen to our 'things'. I have sometimes witnessed families become estranged while fighting over 'things' or the opposite when the children haul mom and dad's 'stuff' to the trash or have a big bonfire. So, even when there are children some do not take care of possessions as we have done in the past.

We have found that by staying involved in church, community activities, nurturing relationships with other people and working part time, I have been able to keep a positive attitude MOST of the time and find a "new type of happiness" in life. There are times and events that occur that sometimes make me lose my perspective and I get depressed. But, I can always observe others who seem to have a more difficult time with life events who have not been 'touched with the grief of having a child die.'

I have also observed how parents who have not endured the death of a child do not always get support from their living children and then I realize that being childless is perhaps not that different from those who

have children. One dear friend, has three children and several grown grandchildren for whom she often baby-sits, helps them financially and does things for them. Yet she often has to ask friends to mow her lawn or repair things that her children and grandchildren just seem not to see that need to be done. We also have relatives with children who help their kids all the time. Yet, the children are not there for mom or dad when they need the help. So sometimes feeling sorry for oneself makes one feel guilty when we truly observe what is happening around us.

We have learned that it is vitally important to find a local bereavement support group and to attend regularly those first years of grief. It is important to become involved and 'give back' to those who are newer in their grief than we are ourselves.

I read every book I could find on grief, devoured all the newsletters and listened to tapes until I realized I really was not going crazy and that things I thought, did, forgot, or was angry about was very normal for a bereaved parent.

I cried oceans of tears, told Rhonda's story and our grief story millions of times to thousands of different people, kept a journal, which is an invaluable tool of measuring one's progress, and allowed friends to help me when I needed help.

Some now childless parents also are widowed or divorced. Some also are an only child and their parents are deceased. Some have since found that their family has 'disowned' them since being childless seems to make them a leper. These now childless bereaved parents often need additional support from trained professionals.

We started Alive Alone, Inc. in 1988 to be an additional support system for now childless parents. We publish a periodical that is strictly written by and for now childless parents. We also network parents whose only child/ all children died of a similar age or means of death. We also work with other support groups to provide seminars and sharing sessions for their

regional and national conferences so that the needs of now childless parents are met.

Coping with the death of one's only child/ all children is the most difficult experience anyone will ever encounter. But, it is possible to find a 'new normal' and be able to reinvest in life again and find a new form of happiness.