

Cruse Bereavement Care



The Death of a Child

“I feel so frightened. What am I going to do? I feel like a fine china cup on a roller coaster. It does not seem real. When is this all going to stop?
Lonely and vulnerable, I turned to Cruse.”

The death of a child is widely held to be the most devastating experience a parent can face. It represents the death of much unfulfilled potential. The relationship between parent and child is unique.

Most parents who have suffered such a bereavement feel that it is against the natural order of things and that they should not outlive their child. The age of the child - pre-birth or adult - makes no difference to the grieving parent. The sense of despair can feel overwhelming.

Death brings with it shock, disbelief, denial, confusion, helplessness - feeling as if in a dream. The pain of facing reality can manifest itself in a number of ways.

- Physical symptoms: disrupted sleeping patterns, loss of appetite, extreme fatigue, emotional and physical exhaustion
- Separation anxiety: the deep yearning for the dead child, the pain that feels as if the heart were indeed broken
- Conflicting emotions: anger and guilt
- The ‘if only’ syndrome: if only the illness had been diagnosed.

During the time of deep mourning, there is a great need to go over and over the circumstances of the death. However, whilst everyone experiences grief in their own way, there are common factors to the healing process that can be identified as time goes on.

Withdrawal: very soon exhaustion sets in, manifested by fatigue, despair, anguish and in many cases depression; also at this time many parents withdraw from friends; they are overwhelmed by grief.

Acceptance: during this period the parents come to realise that nothing can change what has happened; this phase is one of searching for meaning, forgiving and trying to move away from the awful circumstances of the death.

Learning to live again: this stage occurs towards the end of the grief process when all conflicting emotions have been faced and the grief has been worked through; the beloved child can then be remembered without heart-rending sobs.

Surviving grief: when we have lost someone we love, things cannot return to what they were for that would be to make them as though they had never been.

Yet it is the experiencing of grief, and not denying or avoiding it, that finally heals us. There always will be poignant memories, yet we know we have made progress when our child can be lovingly remembered without agonising pain. Throughout this whole process we come to find that we have changed, that our values have changed. We discover strengths that help us fill the emptiness and rebuild our lives.