We as bereaved parents, help grieving parents and families rebuild their lives following the death of a child

MESSY by Emily Long

If there is anything I’ve learned from more than 14 years of life after loss, it’s this: Grief, like life, is messy.

It’s beauty mixed with brokenness and tears. It’s joy mixed with unbearable sorrow. It’s hugs mixed in with bouts of loneliness. It’s laughter that turns into tears that turns back to hard won smiles. It’s messy, full of shades of gray, and never what I expect it to be.

The last few months have reminded me just how messy and uncomfortable and unpredictable life can be. No matter how smoothly life may go, there will always be times when it throws us unexpected curveballs.

A while back, I spent time in the hospital with a mother and her baby. The baby had a prolonged seizure and for a while it was unclear whether the baby would make it. It was scary and overwhelming and traumatic – and brought up all of my painful and devastating memories of the death of my fiancé and the stillbirth of our daughter. That same morning, I got news that a dear friend was in the hospital dying. She died less than 48 hours later. Two days after that I got news that another friend may be close to dying and leaving this earth behind as well. She died a couple of weeks later.

It’s been a helluva few months.

I’ve been plagued by nightmares and painful memories. I cry for losses old and new. I have felt like I’m walking around in a fog, stumbling on rocks and roots blurred by grief. My bones literally ache. I have struggled with loneliness and doubt and fear. I feel raw and bleeding and fragile.

What I want to do is crawl into bed with a few pints of ice cream and pizza to stuff myself into oblivion. Or, if that doesn’t work, I’m tempted to throw myself into work and busyness and distraction so that I don’t have to feel so damn much.

More than anything I want to numb myself and get rid of this sick, broken, ugly feeling in the pit of my stomach and the terrible aching in my chest that makes it hard to breathe.

When my fiancé and daughter died, that’s exactly what I did. I numbed out, checked out, and lost myself in years of eating and working and running fast and hard away from facing that unbearable loss and grief.

However, what more than 14 years of loss has also taught me is that I can’t possibly eat enough to bury grief. I can’t work hard enough or long enough to completely numb the pain. I can’t run far enough or fast enough to escape the grief and pain and messiness of life.

And recently, as the blows have come, I have taken a deep breaths and allowed the weight of grief settle onto my bones.

It hurts to lose those we love. It leaves a gaping hole in our life that isn’t supposed to be there and the grief that fills that hole is heavy, unpredictable, and raw.

We can try to run from it, bury it in work or food or sex or alcohol or plain old denial, but grief will always catch up with us in one way or another. It cannot be outrun.
We can only breathe, however painfully, through the brokenness. Cry through the loneliness. Cling to whatever we can to carry us through the unpredictability and uncertainty. Find something – anything – to light the way through the fog and darkness.

How do we live through grief and loss?

We hold on… To those we love who still remain. To the love we have for those who are gone. To whatever gets us through the nights, the hours, the moments of pain. To our hearts – that part of us that despite the brokenness and unbearable aching continues to beat life in our chest. To hope that this moment of unforeseen grief and seeming unending pain will not be all that is left, that laughter and light will come again. To trust that however angry and devastated we feel in this moment, this is not the end of the good in life.

We hold onto life – as messy and unpredictable and uncomfortable and unfair as it might be.

To experience such love and lose that which we love so deeply is an unbearable grief.

Yet to love at all is life’s most beautiful gift.

That’s what I hold onto. Love. Because not even death can take that gift away.

“As bereaved parents, we cannot escape grief and sorrow. We learn to hold them differently. We learn to make love the greater narrative, to love in spite of death, and to keep loving because our hearts won’t stop.” ~ Lexi Behrndt

HELPING A GRIEVING CHILD
www.thewarmplace.org

Ways to help a child deal with grief after a loved one dies:

- Allow expression of all feelings.
- Understand the child’s losses and factors that inhibit grieving.
- Recognize that lectures are not helpful.
- Adult/caregiver should meet the child’s needs for affection and security; assure him that he is loved.
- Set boundaries.
- Listen.
- Be patient in your helping and be accepting of differences in grieving.
- Try not to attempt to “fix” everything.
- Allow attendance and if possible, participation in rituals of death.
- Allow children to engage in play. Encourage them to draw and to tell stories. Read stories to young children that deal with death and loss.
- Work with the child’s teacher and school counselors to help the child in the school environment with their schoolwork and peer situations relating to the death.
- Adults and caregivers need to grieve in front of children. Explain also tears, fatigue, irritability, etc.
- Allow opportunities for remembering, memorializing.
- Praise children for their courage to grieve and promote a sense of hope.
- Seek help from outside sources -- support groups, community resources (church or synagogue), caring friends, family, and counseling, if warranted.
We welcome bereaved siblings ages 8 to adult to our National Conference in Washington, DC August 4-6. We are offering sibling-specific programming geared toward adult siblings and teens 14 and older. Activities will be available for younger siblings 8 to 13. Sorry, we are unable to provide supervision for younger children. To register go to https://bereavedparentsusa.org/gathering-home/

UNDERSTANDING CHILDREN WHO GRIEVE

With the death of a loved one, children experience the following losses:

1. Loss of the physical presence of the deceased
   - Children struggle to adjust to a life without the physical presence of the deceased in their lives.

2. Loss of self
   - Identity: the child has to rethink his/her role as a child or sibling in the family.
   - Self-confidence: children often feel shame, embarrassment as being different from other children and may have a lessened sense of self-esteem.
   - Health: many children experience the physical symptoms of mourning.
     - Tiredness, lack of energy.
     - Difficulty in sleeping, or prolonged sleeping.
     - Lack of appetite, or excessive appetite.
     - Tightness in throat.
     - Shortness of breath.
     - General nervousness.
     - Headaches.
     - Stomach pain.
     - Loss of muscular strength.
     - Skin rashes.
     - Personality: the child "just doesn’t feel like his/her old self”.

3. Loss of safety and security
   - Emotional security: children experience an emotional upheaval.
   - Physical security: children may worry who will take care of their physical needs.
   - Fiscal security: children worry about the family’s finances.
   - Lifestyle: the family may not feel the same with the absence of the loved one — for example the person who died may have been more fun loving, affectionate, or boisterous and now the family life is now quieter/different.

4. Loss of meaning
   - Goals and dreams: the dreams for the future can be shattered and goals can seem to be unreachable without the support or presence of the person who died.
   - Faith: children often question their faith following a death.
   - Will/desire to live: children may search for meaning in living — “Why go on?”
   - Joy: many children lose the sense of joy in their lives — happiness seems elusive.

Children teach us more about their grief through their behavior than their words. ~ Alan Wolfelt

Factors that inhibit childhood mourning:

- Parent/guardian in child’s life is unable or unwilling to mourn.
- Conflicted relationship with the deceased.
- Child’s desire to protect the adult(s) in his life.
- Family rules related to expressing grief … i.e. not talking about the deceased, or death in general, or about feelings.
- Lack of feelings is reinforced.
- Lack of understanding about the nature of death - for example, referring to the deceased as being “gone” or "sleeping" leaving the child not understanding that death is the cessation of life and that it is not temporary.
- No participation in the rituals of death (funeral, visitations, memorial services, burial).
- Bereavement overload.
- Forced (by self or others) of “hypermaturity”.
- Intentional “busyness” to inhibit time to grieve.
- People in child’s life who minimize the child’s right to mourn, — “you shouldn’t feel that way” or “don’t cry”.
I spoke recently as part of a panel discussion on mental health and faith. I talked about my own journey with depression, my experience as a suicide loss survivor, and how these things shape my concept of God. The session ended, and two or three people lingered to talk. I could see a middle-aged man hovering at the edge of the conversation, waiting. Finally, after everyone else had drifted away, he approached me, the weight of the world in his eyes.

“I have a question,” he said. He fidgeted, looking at the floor. “Something about when you were talking about your brother. When he... you know.”

Killed himself. Yes. Having worked so hard to talk about it myself, I understood his struggle.

He gathered himself, sad eyes locking on mine at last. “What do you say to someone who is going through... what you went through? What can you say to someone... like that?”

That’s a great question.

And the answer is, nothing.

**There is nothing you can say to heal someone else’s grief.**

Of course, you should say something. Express your sympathy. If you’ve experienced something similar, let them know they have company. If this person places faith in prayer, pray with and for them. Just remember that as you offer comfort, there is nothing you can say that will take their grief away.

We all wish otherwise. Most of us are unwilling to face our own grief, much less allow it to bury someone we care about. We look for a quick fix, a silver bullet, something that will end their suffering. But if it was that easy, I have to think that in the long history of human grief, we would have found the magic words by now.

**Instead, when it comes to meeting the grief of someone we care about, we can take two simple steps.**

First, we can drop the assumption that grief is a bad thing. It certainly feels painful and awful and damaging, but grief is a necessary part of the healing process, a new stage of consciousness from which we can deepen our understanding of ourselves and our world. It’s only when grief is denied, placed under a Band Aid of good intentions and decorous codependence, and left to fester in shadow that it can do us any real harm.

The second step is to realize that there is nothing we can say to make someone else’s grief go away. Nothing. Grief belongs to the one who is in it, and no one else can take it away.

**There is, however, something we can do for one who grieves.** We can hold space for them and their grief. This begins with being fully present, opening yourself to their pain and honoring the grieving process. Much of this will happen in silence, which can be uncomfortable at first. But being at the side of one who grieves and holding them in the light of our loving kindness is among the most sacred work any of us can ever do.

**And, finally, although there is nothing you can say to a person who grieves, there is something you can ask.** You can ask them to tell you their story. Invite them tell you the story of their loss.

And, holding space as you are, you can listen without judgment or expectation, without injecting your own thoughts or feelings. You can be patient, focusing not on the narrative as it emerges or your reactions to it but on the hunger of the one who is grieving to make sense of it, put it into words, and be truly heard. After all, the story is far less important than the telling. It’s in the telling that deep healing begins. And when they reach a stopping place, be sure to thank them. They have trusted you, they have honored you with their story, and in healing themselves they have shown us that we can heal as well.

Finally, please don’t think grief goes away. It is now part of our story. And, as we listen and tell the stories of what we have lost, we affirm our experience, our hard-won wisdom, and enter a new stage of consciousness. In this way, telling the story of grief teaches us empathy, courage, resilience, and best of all – hope.

What do you say to someone who grieves? You ask them to tell you about it.
THE LOAD
By Christina Rasmussen

I read Lou Holtz’s words the other day. I understood he knew a truth that so many of us don’t.

“It's not the load that breaks you down, it's the way you carry it.”

The load is not what hurts but how we carry it over the years. What we do with the load. How we move the load. How we heal the load.

At first we have to carry it whichever way we can. We drag it along the road, up the hill and round the bend. We do this because the load is new. We don’t know how to hold it or where to place it at night when we go to bed.

So, we take it with us in our sleep. In our dreams. We wake up with it and think we can never ever leave it at home, or somewhere else away from us. When the load starts to break us as we drag it along, we decide to put it on our backs. Maybe there, it will be easier to carry.

And off we go, out the house and to work. With the load on our back.

At first we think it’s easier, we don’t have to drag it along with us anymore. We can carry it on our backs now. We think we are doing better now. We think we have achieved something great.

We get so good at carrying it on our backs and it becomes invisible to everyone else. They don’t ask to help us carry it. The load is packed in so well, it looks like it is one with us. The way we now carry it is pretty practical.

We can go to work and nobody knows about the load. We can go out to the grocery store and carry more items on our way out. We can take it with us when we drive the kids to school and not even the kids can tell it’s there.

I mean, that’s good news right? Life is moving along. Or is it?

The load now is part of us, our backs are never straight up. Everything we do is harder. Everything we do, we do alone. We are part load, part self. But never a whole. Always a part.

Now imagine this possibility. If when we dragged the load, we let others help us lift it off the ground. We let them walk with us while lifting it. We learned other ways to carry it.

We slowly learned to set it aside when we got out and about visiting with life. We never made it a part of us. Now the load is parked close by. We spend time with it. We visit when it feels like it hurts too much.

And we leave it behind when life is calling our name.

"No winter lasts forever; no spring skips its turn."

Hal Borland
Allow yourself to grieve: Often we push the grief away, or tamp it down by distracting ourselves with activities or tasks. Trying to avoid grief only leads to prolonging it — the grief has to be allowed to surface. Unresolved grief, often referred to as complicated grief, can lead to depression, anxiety, substance abuse and health problems.

Express your feelings in a tangible way: This can be done in many ways, depending on your creativity or usual means of expression. You can write about your loss in a journal, or send a private note to the person you’ve lost. You can make a scrapbook, photo album or create an online memorial celebrating that person’s life. You can also get involved in an organization or philanthropy that was meaningful to them, or make a donation in their name.

Be physically healthy: Your mind and body are connected, and physical health helps with the emotional healing process. It’s natural to feel lethargic or low energy, but if you’re able to take a walk or a run, it will promote the process. Combat your fatigue with an appropriate amount of sleep, and choose foods that provide you not just with comfort but energy.

Don’t judge yourself, or let others judge you: You are allowed to grieve for as long and as deeply as you need to. No one — including yourself — can tell you when to “move on” or “get over it.” It’s okay to be angry, to cry, not cry, or even laugh — you need to allow for moments of joy in your grief, and feel no guilt for having a moment without pain. We recommend that you read the Mourner’s Bill of Rights, to reassure yourself of your “right” to grieve.
We stumble on...bring a little noise into the silence, find in others the ongoing of ourselves.
COLUM McCANN

What a tragic privilege to have had you and lost you.
I will remember you and I will love you until my last dying breath.
- FB/Dr Joanne Caciatore

We cannot ignore our pain and feel compassion for it at the same time.
Brene Brown

My child and pieces of me live in Heaven
# SCARED SidLESS

it takes INVINCIBLE STRENGTH to father a child you can no longer hold, see, touch, or hear. YOU Superhero DAD.
- Angela Miller


**DID YOU KNOW...**

“The death of a child not only ushers in significant and prolonged social, health and economic ramifications for families; it also changes life permanently and fundamentally forever.

As the National Academies of Science have reported, “While bereavement is stressful whenever it occurs, studies continue to provide evidence that the greatest stress, and often the most enduring one, occurs for parents who experience the death of a child.”

Parents are likely to suffer from depressive symptoms, poorer well-being, acute health problems and marital disruption. There is an increased risk of psychiatric hospitalization among mothers in the first five years following the death. Mothers also experience increased mortality from both unnatural and natural causes, while fathers experience increased mortality from unnatural causes (i.e., suicide and accidents).

Further still, the long-term economic ramifications from increased medical expenditures, loss of wages or employment, loss of productivity (e.g., presenteeism and absenteeism) and reduced future income are just beginning to be investigated. Common public policy protections, such as the Family Medical Leave Act, do not consider child loss as a qualifying condition, while 63 percent of employers allow only three days of paid leave.”


**BPUSA’s mission is to help grieving families rebuild their lives after the death of a child.**
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With Gratitude to Our Donors
We regret if we have inadvertently misspelled a name or omitted a donation.
Please email bpusasecretary@gmail.com and the correction will appear in our next newsletter.

When there's gratitude in your heart, life becomes brighter.
Bereaved Parents of the USA National Gathering

August 4-6, 2017 | Washington, DC

Please join us for a weekend of Hope & Healing

REFLECT... and be inspired by our inspirational speakers who offer hope for the future. Learn about the mourning process and how to move forward in your grief during our interactive workshop sessions.

RENEW... old friendships and make new connections with fellow bereaved parents, siblings and grandparents who understand what you are going through. Take off your “mask” and share your grief in a safe and affirming environment.

REMEMBER... your child as you take part in our Candle Lighting Ceremony and Slide Show Presentation. Honor their memory by taking good care of yourself during this healing weekend.

Our speakers for the 2017 National BPUSA Gathering:
Kelly Buckley
Dr. Doug and BJ Jensen
Ron Kelly
Sarah Kravits
Anna Whiston-Donaldson
Gareth Williams
Tom Zuba

www.bereavedparentsusa.org

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