I CAN’T JUST SURVIVE THIS

I have a confession: I don’t want to survive this.

I want to thrive. I want all this unfathomable, ridiculous and stupid pain and the oceans of tears that seem to have no end in sight to mean something past the fact that I buried my firstborn.

I want my daughter’s life and death to mean something. And by mean something I am not suggesting that her death could ever be okay, or justified, but I do want something GOOD to come of it.

And it’s more than the fact that I want her to have a legacy (though I feel like she does, in everything that I do, or say, whether or not people recognize that it is her legacy).

Her loss pierced me personally. I have been wounded to the core, but I don’t want to live out my life just wounded. A part of me will always be fractured. Not quite whole again. Just like your body learns to build scar tissue around open wounds, my desire to continually grow from my experience. My personal experience.

My daughter and I suffered in two astronomically different ways.

I fully believe she is free from pain and I am thankful I don’t ever have to worry over her again, but her healing doesn’t do a whole lot to mend the broken parts inside me that will always long to mother her, hold her hand and walk her through life. I don’t know how you go from being completely broken to one day craving light even a little bit again… but you just do.

And it happens differently for everyone, so don’t let anyone’s journey or timeline or story influence how you are truly to the core feeling. You just find yourself in a new (and usually uncomfortable at first) place in grief. Where you don’t feel intensely sad anymore, and you can’t figure out why.

I am begging you to explore that place. If you’re still intensely sad, then by all means — be sad. But if you’re feeling antsy about getting your hair done again or painting your nails or going to a comedy show (something that you haven’t done or wanted to do since before grief), then by all means do! And go!
Explore things that don’t make your world worse. Dare to live outside the four walls of grief by societal terms – even when your own heart is screaming at you that you should be sad. Or mad. Or depressed. Or whatever.

Push back. Tell your heart that grief can’t be boxed in. It can look a million different ways. You just proved it.

And here is where I have found the most resistance to be, since losing a child. Not the hardest, but it was a close second. And 100% self-induced.

The hardest part was undeniably losing her, of course.

The next hardest thing was learning to live again.

My biggest enemy was staring me back in the mirror, every single morning. Me, myself and I. I stood in the way of my own happiness and my own healing. Some days I felt I didn’t deserve it and some days I just wasn’t interested in healing. It didn’t feel right in a thousand different ways. I tried to find my balance again, like learning to walk again… in this new world and fell time after time after time.

I didn’t make a lot of progress for a long time, but I learned to appreciate the struggle (please check out this TED talk by Zain Asher, not loss related but still SO GOOD).

Every fall, every setback, every time I told myself I couldn’t or shouldn’t or wouldn’t again, but then got back up anyway a day later, or a week later or a month later… I didn’t know it then but I was building muscle.

I was becoming.

Tenacity.

You will make it either way, but if you want to make it to the other side – past function and mere existence – it will be some of the hardest work you will ever do in your life. You won’t surface without scars. You won’t learn to breathe again without practically suffocating to death. And you won’t be able to ever say, that could never happen to me — because it did.

But you will rise, and you will find. You will come through this. Compassion will overwhelm your soul. For the hurting. And the broken. And the lonely. But so much tenacity that you will build for endurance through this impossible stretch will also make you vulnerable to permanent hardness.

Resist this.

Tenacity will get you through the trenches, but it will also create a callous on your heart if it stays longer than it should. Break into compassion, even when it’s hard. Even when all of this doesn’t make sense. Even when your heart’s breaking.

People need your story. They need your light, and they need your darkness too. They need to hear about the mother or father (or sister or brother) who faced their worst nightmare and lived anyway.

Be exceptional. Be broken. Be ready to heal. Be whatever it is you need to be, but above all else be brave enough to break the rules on grief. Again and again and again.

Franchesca Cox is the founder of Still Standing Magazine. She is currently seeking her Master’s in Occupational Therapy, a yogi and author of Celebrating Pregnancy Again and Facets of Grief, a creative workbook for grieving mothers. Learn more about her heartwork on her website.
Kidnapped!

By Chris Harder -- Sacramento-South Placer County Chapter Bereaved Parents of the USA

My friend Chaplain Terry Morgan wrote a book which he titled, “What to do When Grief Kidnaps Your Soul.” What an accurate description of what the death of our child does to us! It’s like we disappear from life, and those around us wonder if we will ever come back again. I’ve heard adults whose sibling died when they were young say that they not only lost their brother or sister, but their parents as well, because their mom or dad couldn’t quite get back into life again.

Child loss also changes a marriage relationship. Sometimes people are consumed by their grief for so long that they no longer recognize each other and find that they’ve grown apart. Friends become uncomfortable around us… they don’t know what to say any more.

Unlike a kidnapping where the person disappears and people hope for their safe return, when our soul has been kidnapped by tragedy, we are still visible to those around us. They see us and wonder how long it will take before we will get over it and return to our “old self.” It’s confusing to everyone… even us! It’s as if we become the walking dead because we feel empty and lifeless inside. We maneuver through the day without seeing what’s going on around us because our mind is held captive by our grief.

Some people say, “time heals all wounds,” or “just give it some time, you’ll get over it.” They’re confused, aren’t they? The truth is, time doesn’t do the healing. It’s what we do during that time that allows healing to take place so we can get through it. One of the difficulties is that there is nothing we could have done in advance to be prepared for losing a child. What we need to know about dealing with grief has to be learned while we are struggling.

So where do we start?

First, I’d encourage you to take care of yourself. Eat healthy, drink healthy fluids, rest (even if you can’t sleep), and don’t try to self-medicate with drugs or alcohol. As your strength returns, get some exercise. It relieves stress and gets you moving again, even if it’s a short walk around the block. Take time for yourself and remember to find something that will bring you enjoyment by providing a little retreat from your grief.

Next, learn about the grieving process. Talk to people who have been through it. Attend a grief support series, the kind that teaches about grief systematically such as GriefShare (www.griefshare.org), GriefCare (contact Pam Brubaker 916.300.8776), or Journeying Through Grief (www.GriefToolbox.com).

Read about the grief journey others have experienced… there’s a wealth of knowledge between the covers of the thousands of books that have been written on the subject. There are endless resources on the Internet for bereaved parents, and some on-line support groups are helpful.

This may sound odd, but there are many movies and television programs that include grief situations that we may not have noticed before. In my opinion, most of them are pretty accurate in their portrayal of grief. They won’t teach us all we need to know about grief, but by observing these situations, they will help us figure it out for ourselves.

There are also conferences you can attend where you can learn from experts about dealing with grief. National bereaved parent organizations such as Bereaved Parents of the USA www.bereavedparentsusa.org have national conferences each year during the summer months. (See page 7 for more details)

Connecting with other bereaved parents who truly understand is important beyond measure. When we are with people who understand, we don’t have to wear the mask that says, “I’m ok.” We can just relax and be ourselves. In time, you may be the “safe place” for someone else who is newly bereaved, or even someone who has stuffed their grief for a while and is now looking for help.
The good news is, we are created to be resilient! We are survivors! Most of us want to get through it and we don’t want to give up. We may feel overwhelmed for a time, and we may feel pushed back by those waves of emotions, but we are inclined to get back up and keep moving forward.

The death of a child will change us forever. We may look the same on the outside, but we will never be the same on the inside. It will change our perspective on life, hopefully for the better. It will make us stronger. Arleah Shechtman, author of My Beloved Child, My Journey Since the Death of My Daughter said, “The biggest surprise I’ve had after Sharon’s death is that my grieving has opened me up to all that is beautiful and wonderful about this world. My appreciation for others and their struggles is greater, and I stop to smell the roses more often – something I call ‘living from the gut’.”

If you’re reading this and you’re new in your grief, you may be doubtful that you’ll ever feel this way. I think, though, that in time, you’ll be surprised at how true this will be for you. Later in her book, Arleah goes on to say, “It might comfort you to realize that the life you build from this point on wouldn’t have been possible without the love you felt – and still feel – for your loved one. In a very real way, he or she is still a vital part of who you are.”

When a kidnapped person returns, they are not the same person they were before. If you reach out for help and do the work, you will be able to figure out who you are again so you can function as the new person you have... or will... become. Yes, it’s true... grief does kidnap your soul... but it doesn’t have to be forever.

BEFORE AND AFTER LOSS:
A NEUROLOGIST’S PERSPECTIVE ON LOSS, GRIEF AND THE BRAIN

Loss is traumatic.

It wasn’t until I experienced my husband’s death that I learned how disorienting, harrowing and perilous it is to lose people close to us. To lose something that is simply basic to who we are and how we make sense of our lives.

As a practicing neurologist, I thought I was prepared. But instead, I struggled. It took many months until I had a flash of insight - for the first time I saw my experience through the eyes of a neurologist. I realized that the problem wasn’t sorrow, it was a fog of confusion, disorientation, and delusions of magical thinking. This insight spurred me to study how loss affects the brain, and what I learned about emotional trauma became the basis for Before and After Loss: A Neurologist’s Perspective on Loss, Grief and Our Brain.
For people experiencing loss, I believe demystifying the experience is an important step toward healing. When we think about brain trauma, we usually think about physical injury. But we now understand that the emotional trauma of loss has profound effects on the mind, brain, and body. An especially pronounced example is the Broken Heart Syndrome where stress hormones result in abnormal heart movements and symptoms of chest pain and shortness of breath. This may result in an actual heart attack although more often than not, it resolves without lasting heart damage. Imaging studies of the brain show that the same brain regions are activated by both physical and emotional pain. These examples show the pervasive effects of traumatic loss.

The recent death of President George Bush less than 8 months following the loss of Barbara Bush also highlights the serious consequences of emotional trauma. In fact, there’s a pronounced increase in accidents, illness, and death of the surviving spouse in the year following loss. As our understanding of physical traumatic brain injury has expanded to include concussive sports injury, it’s time to expand the definition to include emotional traumatic brain injury. It wasn’t so long ago, that concussions (brief alterations of consciousness after a blow to the head) were considered harmless; athletes were routinely returned to the field after they appeared to recover from being dazed or unconscious. We now understand that although no injury is seen on MRI or CT scans of the brain, brain injury has occurred. In the same way, the emotional trauma of loss results in serious changes in brain function that endure.

How can we use this new understanding of emotional traumatic brain injury to promote healing and emotional restoration?

The brain kicks into action to protect us during traumatic experience. Imagine what would happen if we weren’t able to function during traumatic times. To sustain function and survival, the brain acts as a filter sensing the threshold of emotions and memories that we can and cannot handle. So the brain is especially active in managing the stress of traumatic loss. Recovery depends upon gradually reconnecting with suppressed memories- the emotions and memories that we’re not ready to face. Disturbing dreams by night and intrusive thoughts by day are evidence of traumatic memories that are buried in the subconscious, and were never properly integrated with past memories and emotions, our previous life experience.

To move forward, we need to find tools that will help us reconnect with suppressed memories. Equally important is the need to find activities that are diverting to refresh the mind. Tools for reconnection may include journaling, faith-based practices, meditation, and seeing a counselor. Keeping a dream journal may gradually uncover repetitive themes. Mysterious at first- over time the symbols in our dreams begin to reveal themselves. For refreshment, try creative practices (art, music, dance) and the healing powers of the outdoors.

Even in the worst of times, it’s empowering to understand the basis for our experience of loss and to learn steps we can take to enhance recovery and healing. It’s true that healing will come with time, but post-traumatic growth requires insight.

*Lisa M. Shulman, MD, is the author of Before and After Loss: A Neurologist's Perspective on Loss, Grief, and Our Brain and is a professor of neurology at the University of Maryland. She is the author or editor of numerous books on neurologic disorders.*
If I was to survive, grief had to become a part of my essence. In that realization, I felt a release: Grief was love and had been right from the start. Only then did I understand why grief had never left my side and never would — because it was the love for my child, and that was everlasting.

Katja Faber

There is no right or wrong way to grieve. We can grieve in the arms of others. We can grieve in solitude. We can grieve through tears, laughter, meditation, movement, or prayer. The only rule is that we hold our hearts with the utmost care and allow ourselves the room to feel and the space to heal with no timelines or expectations.

Liz Arch
The Courage to Rise

Be the things you loved most about the people who are gone.

Someian Quotes

To lose a child is to lose a piece of yourself.

Dr. Burton Grebin
It’s not too late to make plans to attend the 2019 BPUSA National Gathering Conference August 2-4 at the Sheraton Clayton Plaza Hotel in St. Louis, Missouri.

Our Gathering theme is *Spirit of Love* reminding us as we face our own struggles, of the inspiration and hope our nation once found in the *Spirit of St. Louis*. Please join us and feel the love as we remember our children together.

The Gathering Conference will be a three-day event with keynote speakers, workshops, meals, entertainment and memorial ceremonies all designed to help bereaved parents and their families understand that they are not alone in their grief. Our annual Gatherings have been praised as wonderfully meaningful experiences, life-changing in many ways. Participants come away feeling refreshed and revitalized, better informed about the grieving process, more aware of hope and promise and affirmed by meeting new friends who travel the same path.

The Sheraton Clayton Plaza Hotel is a modern hotel designed to accommodate gatherings like ours, including clean, comfortable rooms, spacious conference facilities, a modern fitness center (including a pool) and a first-class restaurant. The hotel is offering special room rates to Gathering attendees.

Known for its iconic arch, a must-see attraction, St. Louis is a vacation destination of national prominence, with many sightseeing adventures to enjoy. Plan a family vacation in conjunction with the Gathering. Spend some time remembering your child and then explore life on the Mississippi in this bustling, modern “Gateway to the West.”

*Heard at last year’s conference:* “goosebumps, inspiration and loving connections throughout the weekend” … “meeting and learning from experts in the field of grief who lovingly guide us with their wisdom and compassion” … “the feeling of being surrounded by all the love in the room that each parent has for their child” … “so much acceptance there” … learning from each other what works and what doesn’t work on my grief journey” … “Realizing that healing actually is possible” … “Laughing -- yes laughing and crying together”

CLICK HERE FOR MORE INFORMATION
Why Does Healing Feel Like A Betrayal?

By Katja Faber

In the first years after my son’s death, the mere mention of the word ‘healing’ made me recoil.

Healing. It’s a simple, comfort word, right?

A concept that all right-minded people believe is a healthy thing, supposedly the ultimate goal for those who are suffering.

So why, I used to ask myself, DOES HEALING FEEL like a betrayal?

Terminology is a tricky thing. The use of the word ‘healing’ tends to confuse most loss parents. It’s not surprising. We associate healing with ‘getting over’ something, much as one would if you’d broken a leg and it had healed ‘nicely’ as doctors are apt to say.

If you heal, it means you’re better and that you’re no longer sick or injured. It means you’re back to normal; it means you’ve got over your injury; it means you’re now well.

To me, healing seemed an aberration.

If there’s one thing loss parents know it’s that grieving the death of our child doesn’t mean we’re sick. Nor are we stuck. Nor do we want to ‘move on’. We are grieving. There’s no fixing this. Our child is dead. What we yearn for is understanding and not some quack remedy for our devastating loss.

When well-intentioned friends and family used the word around me, it felt as if my grief wasn’t being acknowledged. It sounded as if they were sweeping aside the magnitude of my loss. That they felt so distressed at seeing me traumatized that their need to white-wash my soul-crushing grief took precedence over my feelings. I wept for their lack of understanding.

Yet, in these four years since my son was killed, I have learned that healing is possible.

It doesn’t look or feel like I thought it would but the fact is that it can and is happening. A work in progress. Day by hard day. It’s tough, grieving grief work. Often, I’m too tired to even contemplate the rest of my life without my son but I sense that healing is happening nonetheless.

And that’s because healing following the death of our child is all about transformation. It has nothing whatsoever to do with ‘moving on’ or ‘forgetting’. It’s about inner change. It’s about becoming the best new version of ourselves as we wrap our heart around our grief. It’s about using grief to teach us how to build a new, different life where joy and loss reside together. It’s about gently cradling the grief like we would our child and using it to help us towards the light.

I liken it to a metamorphosis. This healing changes us to our very core. We are no longer who we were. The death of our child transforms us so profoundly that it’s as if we emerge into a new world, never to return to our old pre-loss state.

So why did I reconsider my view on healing?

Before I could do so, I had to crawl my way out of the abyss that was acute raw grief for long enough to catch my breath. Believe me, that took a while, not months but years.
And then, as insipid colors began to filter back into my life, what helped me to understand that transformative healing was possible was the slow realization that it was fear that was making me recoil at the idea of it. Fear? Why did I fear healing? Because it felt like a betrayal.

Did other loss parents feel that way too? Most certainly, yes. I was not alone. Almost everyone I spoke to who’d lost a child felt uncomfortable at the mention of the word ‘healing.’

So, I decided to identify the source of my fear so as to challenge my concept on healing.

**Six points to consider if healing feels like a betrayal:**

1. **If I heal it means I don’t love my child enough.** Certainly, this was my greatest fear. Rest assured, healing has zero to do with how much you love your child and everything to do with acceptance. Accepting that love is eternal and that I would grieve my child for the rest of my life allowed me to understand that healing wouldn’t diminish my grief or love but instead could transform me.

2. **If I heal, I’m being selfish by putting my needs before those of my dead child.** Irrational fear disguised as guilt was hijacking my thoughts and turning them upside down. Learning to parent a dead child is hard work and challenges us in every conceivable way. You’ll need energy and focus to undertake grief work as you carry the love of your child within you. Practice self-compassion and self-care, and allow yourself to transform into the best version of you as a loss parent.

3. **If I heal it means I’m forgetting my child.** Trust that you will never forget your child any more than you’ll forget how to breathe. Our children are always with us. Always.

4. **If I heal people will think I’m not grieving or that I don’t care enough.** Grief is as unique as a fingerprint. Each one of us grieves in our own way. Some loss parents are extremely private about their pain, others talk about their loss, and some set up foundations. Whatever your way of grieving, it is yours, as is your healing. No one can take that away from you and neither should they judge. If they do, perhaps it’s time to expunge them from your life.

5. **If I heal, I’ll start living life again and that thought frightens me.** Living life again will happen slowly and will come from within. It’ll be about learning to live in a new way. It’ll be a different you, with grief as your teacher and the love for your child guiding you every step of the way.

6. **Healing feels like a betrayal and I can’t even contemplate such an idea.** Give it time. Explore your feelings and identify which ones serve fear and which bring comfort. Don’t push the fear away but instead, listen to it and find out why it resides in your heart right next to the love for your child. Trust in your love. It’s the love that will conquer the fear. It always does.
“You are rooted deep within my soul. A part of me forever. In the deepest parts of my heart, there you are.”