

The death of an only child or all children compounds bereavement. Although now-childless parents experience pain and problems similar to bereaved parents with surviving children, being childless deepens the heartache as they confront their future.

Death has stilled the music of your child's laughter. You hurt deeply. You feel empty and alone. You do not know how to pick up the pieces of your shattered life. Your world is standing still. You may think there is no reason to continue to exist. These thoughts and feelings are a normal part of the grief process.

You no longer have someone in whom you can invest your love, time, energy, and resources. Knowing that you might never again be a parent or have grandchildren makes you different from other bereaved parents. You question, "Am I still a parent?" Yes, you are still a parent and will always be the mother/father to your deceased child. You are simply no longer an active parent. This is what makes being childless so unique and finding a purpose or meaning for life so difficult.

All parents with no surviving children are on a similar journey, yet they have unique differences. Some have living or deceased spouses, while others are single. Some are married to their deceased children's father/mother while others are estranged or divorced. A few have grandchildren and some have stepchildren or step-grandchildren. Some have endured multiple losses. A few are estranged from their grandchildren or family members. Some have living siblings and parents while others have also experienced the deaths of many or all family members.

Children have died due to many different reasons: illnesses, accidents, homicide, suicide, sudden infant death, drunk driving accidents, or unknown causes. Yet, even though there are differences, the unique bond of having no surviving children is shared. All now-childless parents are searching for answers, friendships, understanding, compassion, love, and healing.

Losing a child is the greatest loss. Losing your only child adds another layer; and losing a young child that you dreamed of having your whole life is beyond words. An only child is a parent's whole existence, purpose, and inspiration in life. The bereaved parent loses his/her identity. Who and what am I now? I have no other child to love. People would say, "You are young. You can have another child." No one understands your life's circumstances and what you have been through. Facing forty or fifty years of grief and being childless is daunting. Life is changed and learning to navigate in a world without your child is a struggle every day.

There are a growing number of families today, who have lost an only child or all their children. Many of them have no grandchildren, and many are too old to start another family, adopt, or foster. Parents who have been devastated in this way, suffer extraordinary hardships and loss of identity, as they no longer have a child to parent on this physical earth.

As we (those of us considered geriatric which is 50+ years) approach our own health issues and mortality, our support system often shrinks. We now have to rethink (in a short amount of time) who will become our health care surrogates, our beneficiaries;

who will inherit our possessions and photo albums? Are there communities for us that meet our needs, even while knowing that living amongst others who have children and grandkids visiting can be triggering? How will our child's memory be preserved? All that we thought our child might have inherited, may now be re-purposed to a foundation to keep his/her memories alive. It is often a very lonely, frightening world for parents like us. Senior services in communities can be helpful, but often know very little about our loss. We are now in a position of educating others, networking with others like us, and advocating for what we need.

These parents represent no faith or many faiths: Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, or atheists and agnostics. Some did not believe in a Higher Power prior to their child's death, even as others who previously were believers are now questioning how a loving God could allow the death of their child. You may be questioning your belief system. This, too, is very normal. As you "crawl" through the valley of pain and search for answers, your belief system may change. However, if you continue to search, you will most likely have a stronger belief system than prior to your child's death. It is okay to question God. He has "broad shoulders," and you will not be punished for your questioning. Read everything you can about various belief systems and spirituality. You will eventually find answers as you wrestle with this important aspect of your grief journey.

Generally speaking, it seems to take a longer period of time for bereaved now-childless parents to reinvest in life than it does for those who have surviving children or grandchildren. Give yourself adequate time

to grieve, for you have suffered the greatest injury you will ever experience. There is no right or wrong timetable for grief. Each person is unique and his or her past experiences and personalities are different.

How Do I Find a Purpose for Living?

It takes longer for now-childless parents to find meaning in life again. Your entire life focused on your child even though you may have a spouse and/or an enjoyable career.

Take baby steps of finding new purpose in life by thinking of something for which your child had a passion. Then think of HOW you can honor your child's legacy by using that passion to do something memorable in honor of your child. This may be creating a scholarship to assist other children in participating in sports or the arts or to assist students with college expenses. Some parents work for causes such as finding the cure for cancer, genetic diseases, or other disabilities. Perhaps you might donate time and/or finances to a charity that has helped you on your grief journey.

There will always be a vacuum in your life as the love you shared with your child will never be filled with anything you do. Nevertheless, you will find you may have time and energy that need to be expended in meaningful ways. You can do things to commemorate your child and take the love that you shared with him/her into your future, thereby keeping memories alive.

Attend support group meetings and conferences. Ask for previous periodicals from Alive Alone that will assist you with ideas for commemorating your child. This will assist you in finding a purpose once again.

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Alive Alone, Inc. is an international nonprofit organization that was founded by Rodney and Kay Bevington in 1988, to honor their only child, Rhonda, who was a delight to her parents. The life they knew and the love they shared as a family abruptly ended when Rhonda died just two months prior to her sixteenth birthday due to what was expected to be a routine surgery. They later learned that Rhonda had lymphoma and a large cancer mass hidden behind her breastbone which was undetected by a CAT scan just two weeks prior to the planned biopsy and exploratory surgery.

Alive Alone publishes a periodical for now-childless bereaved parents five times per year. It provides a service to network such parents according to the age or cause of death of their child. For more information visit their website.

Alive Alone
www.alivealone.org

Alive Alone also has a Facebook page.
You may contact Rodney and Kay Bevington at
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To locate a BPUSA chapter in your area; find information about our Annual Gathering Conference; subscribe to our newsletter or read grief-related articles, poems and other brochures like this one, please visit our website:

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Grief of the Now Childless



*Helping grieving parents and families
rebuild their lives following
the death of a child.*