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2011

## Death of a Child

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## Death of a Child

Of the possible losses one might experience, the death of a child is among the most intense. For a parent to bury a child screams against the order of the universe, beginning a journey of bereavement that may linger in varying degrees and manifestations throughout a parent's lifetime (Moules, 2008). Specific circumstances prior to and surrounding the death of a child—such as the manner of death (e.g., sudden accident, suicide, or prolonged illness) or preexisting family stress—may complicate the grieving process for both relatives and friends.

**Description.** Though the experience of parental grief is known to be an idiosyncratic process, there are certain commonalities that can assist the counselor in understanding and ministering to the bereaved (Talbot, 2002). A parent's initial reaction, especially the mother's, may be profoundly disorienting as she begins to sense a displacement of her role. Mothers commonly find their greatest solace with others who have experienced a similar type of loss and may feel misunderstood by and isolated from those who appear to minimize her grief. A father's grief, though manifested in a markedly different manner, can be just as intense as the mother's (Nelson, 2004). He may sense a feeling of loss of control because of his inability to have prevented the death and now to alleviate the mother's grief. Both parents commonly struggle with remorse for neglecting to express sufficient love to the child or with guilt that they might have actually done something to cause the death. In situations such as Sudden Infant Death Syndrome

(SIDS) this can be compounded, especially by suspicions conveyed by medical staff and law enforcement (Silverman & Kelly, 2009).

**Treatment.** As bereaved parents learn to live without their child, they require a support system of individuals who will acknowledge the extent of their sorrow without directing them in supposedly proper ways of grieving. Too often church and family members administer initial care immediately after the loss but soon after begin to avoid contact. This may be due more to a feeling of inadequacy to minister effectively than it is a disregard for the loss. Nevertheless, the result may be that the parents feel neglected and betrayed.

In addition to grief counseling, parents may find it helpful to attend support meetings of groups such as The Compassionate Friends, a national organization of bereaved parents that provides resources such as books, newsletters, and online support communities. Parents should be encouraged to reflect on experiences by talking to others, journaling, scrapbooking, blogging, and honoring the child's memory through meaningful acts of service or rituals.

Counselors should intentionally speak the child's name and not be concerned if doing so elicits tears or other signs of grief. Though the name represents painful loss, it is more so a precious sound to the parent's ears and can serve as a powerful gesture that can bring healing. Expressing interest in the child can be displayed by asking questions about and commenting on pictures of him or her. Refrain from using language that directs

parents to “move on” or “get over” their grief. They will resent the insensitivity of such a suggestion.

The goal of “recovery,” or the complete absence of grief, may not be the best model for bereaved parents. Rather than to look for indicators of grief’s absence, counselors should be encouraged by signs that parents are learning to live with a healthy connection to their child’s memory. Barrera et al. (2007) refer to this as “integrated grief” —the ability to positively reframe reality and to exercise some control over grief reactions while focusing on life being back to normal.

**Spiritual Issues.** Though many bereaved families find solace in faith, it is just as typical for some to experience such a spiritual crisis that they question their spiritual beliefs (Talbot, 2002). Those who blame themselves for their child’s death may find it difficult to believe God would ever forgive them, and those who blame God struggle with relating to Him as they had prior to the loss. Resolving this spiritual crisis, however, is instrumental in their healing. Parents who claim that their faith had sustained them describe a point at which they consciously chose to believe despite their doubts. They begin to identify with God the Father as a bereaved parent, with the suffering of Job, and with David in the loss of both his infant son and adult son Absalom. They find hope in the assurance that their child is safe in eternity and that they will one day be reunited.

**Conclusion.** Though bereaved parents report a sense of enduring loss, they also commonly report a transformed approach to life and relationships (Talbot, 2002). Their values often become more family oriented, and they develop a heightened compassion

toward others evidenced by acts of service. With a strong support system, especially of others who can empathize with the loss of a child, bereaved parents can achieve a healthy measure of integrated grief as they learn to live differently.

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