

Complicated Grief after the loss of a child

The death of a child is one of the most difficult experience a person ever faces. Taking good care of a child is often the most important thing in a parent's life. Parents begin to care for a child as early as conception as they imagine what the child will be like. A child's death triggers feelings of care-giving failure. The loss of a child can sever a parent's feeling of connection to the future. Losing a child often feels to parents like losing a part of themselves. Self-blaming thoughts can derail the adaptation process and lead to complicated grief. The highest rates of complicated grief occur in parents who have lost children.

Intense emotions like sadness, anger, guilt and despair invade the lives of parents coping with a child's death and these may be difficult to regulate. Life is transformed and may seem empty and confusing. Answering a simple question such as "How many children do you have?" is suddenly a problem. Bereaved parents typically wrestle with difficult questions such as "Why did this happen?" or "Why didn't I prevent it?" or, sometimes, "Why was my child so reckless or negligent?" These kinds of thoughts and feelings contribute to development of complicated grief and need to be resolved in order for grief to find its rightful place in a parent's life.

A bereaved couple may find themselves unable to support each other after a painful shared loss. Their different ways of grieving may seem jarring to each other. One parent may long to talk about the child and their feelings, while the other parent may feel determined to avoid these very discussions. Conflicting needs can deprive a couple of the support they need from each other causing stress in the relationship and adding to the pain of the loss.

A parent may cherish memories of the child or long for the memories they had hoped to build. Parents may wonder if it is right to feel joy after the loss of a child. They may question whether restoration of a happy, satisfying life is appropriate since their child has been deprived of these. Those who can't imagine a meaningful life or find a way to restore their sense of purpose, joy and satisfaction may be suffering from complicated grief. If so, complicated grief treatment holds the promise of help.