



THE
GRIEF
CENTRE

Grief after the death of a child



The death of a child

The death and loss of a child is devastating. While having or caring for children can often lead to feelings of vulnerability in parents and caregivers, no adult imagines that they will have to deal with a child dying before them.

Whether the loss is expected (for example, terminal illness) or unexpected (for example, an accident, suicide), and regardless of their age, the death of a child can shatter our sense of safety in the world and our view of the future.



In the immediate aftermath of a child's death, feelings can be overwhelming, and may include feeling:

FROZEN in shock

SUICIDAL and wanting to 'be with' the child who has died

YEARNING for the child that has died

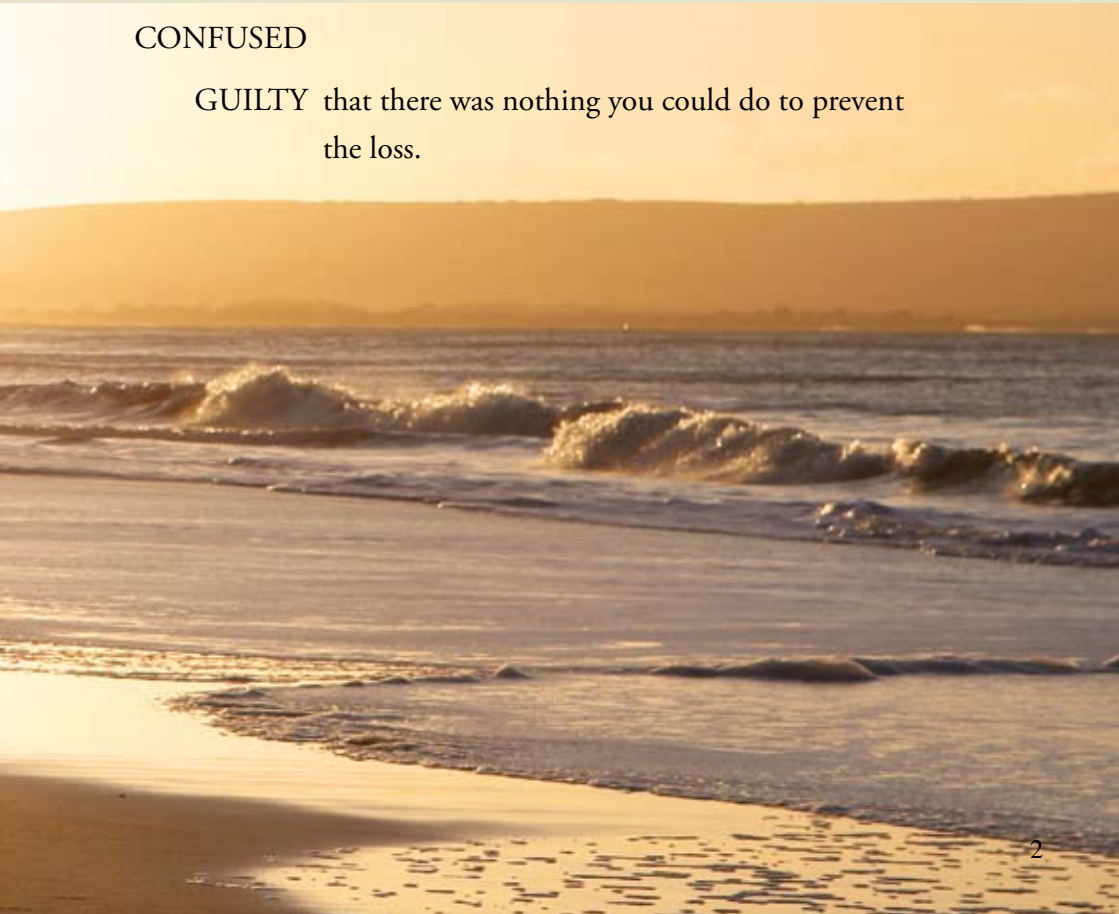
ANGRY with others; angry with your God; angry that the world carries on as if nothing had happened

DEPRESSED

SCARED at the level of emotions, thoughts and the feelings of loss of control

CONFUSED

GUILTY that there was nothing you could do to prevent the loss.



When life changes unexpectedly, it can feel as if yesterday you had a map of the future, which included your relationship with your child, and today, you no longer have a map.

For the time being, standing still, in this unknown, unwanted place can feel like the only thing you can do. Standing still and looking after yourself in your grief, and asking for help when you feel that you cannot do this, are important.

People in your life, your family and friends, will respond to your loss in different ways. There will be those who come forward and help, and those who disappear and seem unable to provide support. Everyone responds to the death of a child differently.



Looking after yourself through grief

- Grief can manifest itself emotionally, physically, behaviourally and spiritually
- Not everyone is able to handle someone else's grief, but you will get a sense of whom you feel comfortable with and who seems able to 'be' with you.
- Although it can feel overwhelming, giving in to your feelings can give you a sense of relief...even if it seems only for a short time. If the thought of releasing your strong feelings is too overwhelming, ask someone you feel comfortable with to be with you while you 'let go'.
- Professional counsellors are trained to support people in their grief. Even if you have never been to counselling before, most people find it helpful talking to someone who is not directly involved in their loss.
- There may be times when you want to be with people and other times when you don't. Don't be afraid of telling people that you are tired and want time on your own.



When a child dies, other family members will be grieving. You may not be able to care for others while you are grieving. This is normal. Seek support from others who can take over from you. People often want to help but don't know what to do. Accept offers of help and tell people what you need.

- If you are worried about your health, a visit to your doctor may be helpful
- Sleep and rest when you need to
- Eat what you can and keep hydrated
- Avoid alcohol and too much caffeine
- Make sure you take deep breaths every now and then



Some things you can do for yourself

ON YOUR OWN

- Take a long bath or shower
- Take a nap when you need to
- Call a friend when you need support
- Go for a walk daily, even a short one
- Lie down on your back on the carpet
- Be aware of your breathing
- Keep a journal to express your feelings

WITH FRIENDS

- Talk
- Get them to do things for you
- Seek their company when you need it
- Let them comfort you

WITH PROFESSIONALS

- Seek the help of counsellors
- Visit your doctor for support
- Ask for information and advice
- Ask for reading materials
- Ask a friend to accompany you
- Grief support groups can be helpful

There may also be many other things you can do that would be helpful to you.

When grief gets tough

The loss of a child disrupts your life and your normal coping abilities. Skills that you previously never thought about consciously, such as your mental functioning, remembering details, your short and long-term memory, speaking coherently, controlling your emotions, can disappear.

The pain can feel extreme at times.

The process of grieving is personal and there is no one model that everyone experiences.

You will grieve in your own time and your own way and you should allow that process to happen. It may feel like you are stuck in your grief at times, or that you keep falling back into how you felt when the death first happened. There will be days when the grief rolls over you like a wave and other days where it seems to recede. There will be times when it feels as if life will never be the same again. In truth, it never will be the same as it was before the loss of your child. We don't 'get over' grief, we grow around it.



Ways to remember

Part of the process of grieving is to find ways to remember your child. For example...

Different forms of creativity can be therapeutic. Art, for example.



Frame some photographs of your child



Keep your child's memory alive by talking about them



Fill a Memory Box for your child where you put special possessions, photos...anything that you want to include.



Plant a tree in your child's memory. Put a seat next to it so you have a place to sit and think about your child.



Keep a journal – daily writing can be therapeutic. As your writing grows, being able to re-read what you have written gives you a sense of where you have been and where you are now.



Grief is a natural response to loss and grieving takes time, patience and support.



The Grief Centre would like to recognise and thank Dr Fiona Pienaar, who has written the material for this booklet. Please acknowledge the source if you are quoting from this material in presentations or publications. For more information or assistance contact us at:

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Our services are available throughout the Auckland region.

Thanks to the following for their support in the production of this booklet:



Content approved 10/13
Printed 10/13