

Surviving
the Loss
of a Child

Support for Grieving Parents

Elizabeth B. Brown



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Preface

This book is written to you—a straight, no-holds-barred conversation about death. If you hurt from the loss of your child, this guide may help you put your life back together. If you are a friend of someone who has lost a child, you will find understanding and ways to support and uphold the griever.

If you have a child whose friend has died, you face one of life's most difficult challenges, because the way you handle your child's grief will influence him throughout his years. You must understand the crucial needs of a child discussed here.

But I suppose that most who read this book are parents, parents like Paul and me, who have lost their dearest treasure. As the parents of the deceased child, your family unit is in danger of being swallowed by the tragedy. You must confront and jump the hurdles that come with your child's death. Failure means your family will face the dangers of divorce, severe depression, and inability to cope with life.

Surviving the Loss of a Child deals with the stunning harshness of our child's death. But more than that, it is a story of shock, grief, and finally of renewed hope. It is a story of survival.

1

Are We Alone?

*L*et go. You have to let LeeAnne go, Betty. The pain won't stop until you release her. The words echoed between my silent screams. *Never! It is not possible to let go. Memories are all I have. If I turn her loose, she will be gone. My little girl will be gone. . . .*

My child is dead. My precious bubble of enthusiasm who made me feel needed and loved has been laid in a pretty, white casket. She is alone. They put her in a hole in the ground. That is no place for a little girl. She is going to be afraid. She needs her mommy.

The pain is so intense. Someone is dragging a knife through me, gouging me, turning it. No! It isn't a knife. It is a scream. A scream tears my body apart, pushing, penetrating. It fills my head until a low wail escapes. Convulsive heaves change to dry, wrenching vomiting. I feel tired, dull, lifeless. The silence is crashing like thunder. The scream is beginning again.

Sleep is gone. The endless nights are filled with fragmented thoughts, questions, wet pillowcases. Paul and I cling together, holding each other. His quiet sobs alternate with mine. The emptiness is a black hole that sucks our strength, consumes our emotions. It eats more voraciously in the stillness.

Is this just a dream? No. Dreams are not like this. Nightmares are not like this. They end. Tonight I relive choosing an outfit for Lee's burial—for the thousandth time. The thoughts are like a McDonald's sign—*We sold 1 million hamburgers, 2 million. . . .* I pick out the treasured purple, long dress with the pink sash, little crocheted socks with flowers. She wore that special dress to school, to church, to be a fairy princess. I add her soft Care Bear with the big heart. She would want something to cuddle. The sick feeling that filled my stomach when we left the dress at the funeral home begins again. Tonight makes 1,001. God, I can't stand this! *Why didn't You save our little girl?* I want her. . . .

Children Do Die

We are alone, alone in the world. Children don't die. I mean real children, children who have been born and leave the hospital. I don't know anyone whose child died. No one looks at us. Everyone looks down or to the side. They know children don't die. They know! I know! . . .

But children do die. Every year in America, 228,000 children under the age of 24 die from catastrophic illness, accident, suicide, or murder, and those statistics do not include miscarriages, stillbirths, or the deaths of those over the age of 24. Fifteen out of every hundred infants dies before his or her first birthday: 28,600 deaths per year due primarily to prematurity or low birth weight. In addition there are 980,000 miscarriages and stillborn

baby deaths per year.¹ Accidents account for 12,175 child/youth deaths per year. Every day in the United States, eight youth ages nineteen and under are killed in homicides, suicides, and unintentional killings. For every child killed by a gun, four more are wounded.²

The good news, though the death rate of children steadily rose in the 1960s and 70s, is that it is now rapidly declining. Between 1980 and 2007, the death rates of children and youth dropped by 46 percent for infants, 51 percent for children ages one to four, 44 percent for children ages five to fourteen, and 32 percent for teens ages fifteen to nineteen. All types of death of children have decreased—excepting suicide, which in 2007 began rising by as much as 9 percent.³ Dr. Stephen Soreff reports that 6.9 percent of high school students have attempted suicide.⁴ Suicide is the third leading cause of death between ages fifteen and nineteen, and the main cause between ages twenty and twenty-four.⁵

Unfortunately, 19 percent of the adult population has experienced the death of a child and 22 percent the death of a sister or brother. Evangelist Billy Graham said one out of four children and youth experience the death of a sibling, mother, or father before they graduate from high school. Taking into account people who have lost both a child and a sibling, 36 percent of the adult population has suffered the death of a child, a sibling, or both a child and a sibling. The Compassionate Friends, Inc., concludes from government reports that deaths from pre-birth through young adults is close to a million annually, leaving nearly two million bereaved parents every year.⁶

So, it is a myth that children do not die! Children do die! When your child dies, you are not alone. You are not the only person to have to survive such a tragedy. You, like others, will survive—if you choose to.

This book is a guideline to survival. When your child dies, the hurt is so great that it does not seem possible to go on living. Part of you has been severed, cut off, and the wound is bleeding. Nothing functions the same. The mind seems to be shut down, foggy, disorganized, disoriented. The emotions are brittle. Tears fall constantly, unexpectedly. Sleep is impossible. The body is weak, uninterested in activity or food, susceptible to every virus. Katherine Fair Donnelly commented, “The early days of grief are a period no parent gets through. It’s just an existence of nonexistence and anguish. The beginning of survival comes much later.”⁷

However, from the first day your child is deceased, you must consciously begin to make decisions to live. You must choose to survive, for if you fail to make the conscious decision, you and your family will fall apart. Here are the dangers: Half of those who lose a child report serious health problems within two years; 35 percent are under psychiatric care; 25 percent report psychosomatic disorders such as ulcers, colitis, or hypertension in a family member; 40 percent have a serious drinking or drug problem; 48 percent have at least one child with serious school problems; 43 percent report significant difficulty in the mother’s homemaking ability; 88 percent feel a family member to be abnormally consumed with morbid grief reactions.⁸

Does it make a difference if parents had longtime knowledge of a child’s pending death, such as in cases of leukemia? No! In his study of such families, Dr. Charles Kaplan found most parents cling desperately to the hope their child will be spared; they do not deal with the possibility of their own child’s death.

Among the few parents who realistically faced the possibility of death, Kaplan found a significant difference in coping actions. They did not try to evade, deny, wish away, or use drugs to blank

out their intense emotions. They analyzed their family situation and designed an escape route from grieving to living.

To take control, you must understand what is involved in grieving. You must learn about the emotions, so you can control them, and you must know the stages a griever passes through. As you become aware of the dangers and pitfalls, you can help walk your family around the traps. However, if you fail to fight for survival, the pain will never go away. Your life will become an endless struggle with resentment and anger; happiness will become a vague memory. The life that ended will become the vortex of the entire family's demise.

Routes to survival involve reason and the knowledge of God's love and God-given directions. At a time when the emotions want to have full control, you must deal with the reality of your loss from a base of reason.

Successful survival will be the most difficult task of your life. Look at your options: Either you make it, whole and filled with God's love, new insights, and even tighter family bonds; or you fail, bringing down your marriage, children, and all other relationships. Obviously, you want to survive. It won't be easy, but with God's help and the gradual ability to "let go" of what once was, you will be whole again.

People who move more rapidly through the grief process:

1. Accept the reality of the child's death
2. Stop wishing for what used to be
3. Agree to let life continue
4. Take control of their lives, not allowing their emotions of grief to be in control

So easy to say, "Let go!" "Accept the death." "Go on with life."
So difficult to do!