

## WHAT IT FEELS LIKE NOW

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No loss compares to the death of a child. If you are a parent coping with such a loss due to a drunk driver, you may never experience pain as intense or urgent as what you feel now. You may feel the pain physically, centralized in one part of your body, such as in your chest or stomach. On the other hand, you may feel as though it has taken over your entire being. Some pain does not manifest itself physically but causes a person to suffer emotionally, mentally, and spiritually.

This pain can be so intense that it is almost intolerable. You may feel driven to do something, yet you know there is nothing that can be done.

**What you might be feeling now:**

*Numbness*

*Physical Pain*

*Emotional Pain*

*Mental Pain*

*Spiritual Pain*

*Anger*

*Intense Guilt*

*Loss of Control*

*Confusion*

*Deep Sadness*

People who have experienced the loss of a child report having problems concentrating and are easily distracted. You may start an activity and forget what you were about to do, only to begin again. Yet, when you think about your child, you are not distracted.

There is a sense of wanting to protect your child even when, in the back of your mind, you know you cannot.

Anger is a common emotion associated with loss. Those who have lost a child in a drunk driving crash are likely to be angry at the responsible individual.

Additionally, the anger may be directed toward members of the legal system or hospital staff. However illogical it may seem, many people direct feelings of anger at a spouse or at themselves for not having prevented the unpreventable. You may even be angry at everything and everyone.

A person dealing with the death of a child frequently feels a great deal of guilt. You might feel guilty for not having been a perfect parent or for not having appreciated your child enough. You may be inconsolable. Your husband, wife, or other family members may no longer be able to provide support since they too are suffering. It may not seem to matter that they are suffering, and you may feel bitter because you cannot help one another. Even the best of friends can be ill equipped to provide the consolation you need.

The stress you may be experiencing can impair your ability to sleep. Persistent stress can be exhausting, contributing to chronic fatigue. You may find yourself feeling irritable. Food may not look appealing to you, and you may lose your appetite. Or you may eat everything in sight. When all these factors exist at once, a person may feel confused or overwhelmed. Confusion, anger, guilt, and deep sadness all play a role in the grief experience. While the grief process is different for everyone, the characteristics of grief are common.

## WHY THESE FEELINGS?

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The love for a child is special. Parents want to care for their child, to solace them, and to help them find happiness. Parents feel their child's joy and find it almost intolerable to see a child in pain yet be unable to help. In no other relationship is the protective urge as intense

**Grief associated with the death of a child is particularly complex because of the nature of the relationship between a parent and the child.**

or compelling as in parents' relationship with their child.

They give their child energy, attention, love, and financial support. They do all of this out of love and a sense of

responsibility. If their child is in danger, the parental instinct to protect the child is automatic. Although the crash occurred in the past, a parent's protective feelings persist. In some cases, the torment of what protective action may have prevented the tragedy lasts long after the event.

Parents remain forever concerned about their children, regardless of how their child is currently behaving or how they currently feel about their child. To a parent, a child signifies future love, growth,

**The loss of your child may feel like the loss of your future.**

and family. Because their child's future is always present in the parents' thoughts, and

is a continuation of life, parents feel that all they do for their children gives life meaning. When a child is killed, the hopes and dreams for a child are lost.

With the loss of those hopes and dreams, parents lose much of the meaning in their lives. If there are other children, not all meaning has been removed. And yet even with other children, an enormous void exists. When a child is killed, the child's parent is apt to feel the child's death was deeply wrong for both child and parent, so wrong it can hardly be expressed. Suffering a wrong so great may make a parent feel that there is no point in trying to do anything.

## UNDERSTANDING THE FEELINGS

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In addition to the feelings already mentioned, parents whose children have been killed are likely to feel empty: empty of hope, of meaning, of desire to go on. The death of your child may make everything

**Exploring and recognizing your feelings will help alleviate the power behind them so that you can function.**

else seem pointless. If you have these feelings, you may not want to relinquish them. It may seem to you these feelings connecting you to

the memory of your child are all that remains of your child. It may seem as though giving them up would be giving up that memory and accepting the gap in your life. It is possible you feel giving up these feelings would be letting go of the child, almost turning your back on the child.

It is helpful to understand grief and feelings associated with grieving. Exploring your feelings helps in coping with your loss and contributes to your healing. Acknowledging your feelings will not diminish them, and may ultimately enhance your ability to live with yourself and with others. Not every parent whose child has been killed shares the same experience. Still, certain emotions are universal.

### HOW LONG WILL THESE FEELINGS LAST?

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Parents who have lost a child in a crash say that after a couple of years, the pain subsides and there can be intervals, usually brief intervals, of not thinking about their child. Within two to three years, life may begin to make sense again, to have meaning. It will come slowly, but it can be expected. Usually, after three or four years, there is likely to be less distress. There will still be bad days, but the pain will be easier to handle. There will be fewer occasions when everything feels overwhelming, and it will be possible to feel sad or to cry without being lost in pain.

### VULNERABILITIES DURING INTENSE GRIEF

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Usually, during the first six months to a year after a fatal crash, people are vulnerable to other misfortunes. Medical experts have found evidence that intense grief weakens the immune system. There is also

evidence that people beset by grief become vulnerable to other sorts of accidents, because they are preoccupied with their loss.

Grief complicates a person's ability to cope with other life events. Some people consumed by grief have little or no reserve for dealing with anything new. They feel overburdened by reasonable requests for help or attention and as a result, seem irritable. Others

**People who are grieving or who are faced with extreme stress are susceptible to illness, such as colds. This same stress can contribute to difficulties in coping with normal activities of daily living.**

cope by withdrawing and isolating themselves.

Family life can become strained since everyone is in pain. For a while, everyone in the family may feel alone, and may place blame on one another. Sometimes people share their pain, but often it is hard for parents to reach out to children or for children to let parents know how they feel. A father and mother may find it hard to share their grief. Although they may seem abnormal, these feelings and behaviors are normal consequences of grief.

## PROCESSING YOUR GRIEF

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*Try to develop enough of an understanding of how your child was killed.*

There will always be unanswered questions; the death of your child may never make sense. A normal reaction to the death of a loved one is disbelief and numbness. This disbelief is normal and is there to protect you, to assist you in assimilating something so foreign into your life. When you are able to develop some understanding about the specifics of the death, you demystify the circumstances and assist yourself in absorbing the difficult new reality.

It is important to know about the crash. Who was driving, from where to where, at what speed? You can be effective in whatever role you choose in the prosecution of the driver or in a civil suit against the driver when you have more information. On the other hand, you may feel initially that you do not want to know any details. All that matters is that your child was killed. Regardless, try to learn as much as you can. Later you may want to know, and then it may be harder to go back and find out what happened.

If you were part of the cause, really part of the cause, recognize this. But don't exaggerate your role. Apart from making yourself feel unbearably guilty, this will only add to your own confusion. Try as dispassionately as you can to understand how it happened.

There will be a police report. Obtain a copy from the law enforcement agency that investigated, if allowed by law in your state. If an autopsy was performed, obtain a copy of the report. You have a right to it in most states. You may or may not be able to

- *Find out who, where, and when.*
- *Obtain a copy of the crash report.*
- *Obtain a copy of the autopsy if allowed by law in your state.*
- *Tell the prosecutor you need to be informed throughout the criminal justice process.*
- *Call people you believe can help you answer questions about the crash.*
- *Try to establish the best answers possible when the answers are not available to you.*

read it when you receive it. But even if you cannot read it immediately, you will be able to read it one day. Tell the prosecuting attorney it is essential for you to be kept informed of each stage of the criminal justice process and you want copies of everything that you have a right to see.

MADD and other organizations can help navigate the courts. The criminal justice system is a formidable system to take on single-handedly. Some organizations provide you with allies who are informed and educated about the law and legal proceedings. Ultimately, you may not achieve what you want to achieve, but with the help of others, you will have an opportunity to focus on what is important to you—as opposed to trying to figure out what to do next.

You have learned enough when you are no longer tormented by questions about how the crash happened. If you find that no matter how much you learn, questions still torment you, then try to think through an explanation that you can accept and live with. If you haven't learned enough to really know what happened, you may have to make guesses about the behavior of the people involved. If you learn more, you can always reconsider, but until you learn more, have confidence in your best guesses.

*Work at coming to terms emotionally with your child's death.*

This is called grief work. It is enormously time-consuming, and there is pain involved. It is inescapable if you are ever to be at peace with yourself. You will have to let yourself remember, to let thoughts and regrets and remorse come to you.

You may cry. It is all right to cry; remember, crying has its own schedule. There is no need to make it happen. Some parents cry right away, while others may not cry for days or weeks. When crying does come, it can feel like a release. This is true for men as well as women. And yet it is not possible to have one long cry and then be done with it.

Gradually, you should become better able to tolerate each particular memory. Thoughts or ideas will no longer overwhelm you. There may still be

pain associated with them, but at a level you can more easily tolerate. You will become able, at times, to feel warmth in response to good thoughts, sadness in response to sorrowful ones.

**B**ecause there are so many memories and thoughts, this process of remembering will go on for a long time. It is important you not get stuck, dealing again and again with one particular thought, one particular image.

*Talk about it.*

**T**he best kind of talking is when you are in touch with your feelings but not overwhelmed by them. Describing your feelings to someone who can understand—someone else who has lost a child, for example—helps you reach this middle ground.

**Keeping a diary or journal may help.**

**F**riends may offer support, but they may not understand. Some will be able to respond to your cues and talk when you want to, or be silent or talk about something else. Some friends will recognize their presence and caring are helpful, and they need not provide more than this. However, other friends may feel uncomfortable with your grief or their own inability to respond to it. Although their intentions may be sincere, they may not know how to continue being themselves with you. In this case,

finding new friends and sharing your experience with them may be beneficial.

There may be others going through what you are going through. They can listen and share. And you can be helpful to them by listening and sharing. Sometimes it is helpful to be together. Other parents find it doesn't help at all.

Writing to yourself, like talking to someone who understands, can help you keep in touch with your feelings without being overwhelmed by them. The process of grief work is lengthy and slow. You can't expect it to ever be complete. Nevertheless, there is no other way to move through it.

*Work toward renewal and meaning in your life.*

To do this, you must recognize yourself as someone who is going on—to try to achieve goals, to enjoy opportunities for happiness, to live. You may find that the things you care about are different from those you previously cared about. This is to be expected. The death of your child will always be a part of you. It will change you in fundamental ways. It would be surprising if your interests and concerns and values didn't change too.

Some parents find that it helps them enormously to work on ending drunk driving. You may feel as though it is the one activity available to you that might bring something constructive out of your loss.

MADD and similar organizations offer an opportunity to help ensure that others do not experience the same tragedy you have experienced. If you have other children at home and worry that they too are vulnerable, then working to end drunk driving may contribute to making them safer.

## HEALING

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What does it mean to heal from the pain, rage, guilt, and emptiness that the killing of a child produces?

Healing does not imply that you will forget your child: it means feeling pain less often. You can be certain you will remember your child for the rest of your life.

You will always cherish the memory of your child,

**When you begin to heal, you begin:**

- *To feel good when something good happens*

- *To feel hopeful about the future*

- *To give attention and energy to everyday life*

- *To be cheerful*

- *To feel at peace with yourself*

and you will always feel some degree of sorrow for your loss.

You are not disloyal to your child's memory when you begin to heal.

**H**ealing does not mean going on as though life is unchanged. When a child dies, life is permanently changed.

You may decide relationships with the people you love are

the most important things in life. Everything else, even activities that you once cared a great deal about, may now seem almost unimportant in comparison.

You may understand, in a way most people do not, how vulnerable we all are and how important it is to make each day count. You may never feel quite as safe as you once did, nor quite as trusting. These are changes that often occur after enormous loss. They are all compatible with healing from the loss of a child.

All these things may not be achieved for some time, but they can be. Today, you may feel as though even thinking about healing from the death of your child makes no sense, as if you have no right to heal. These feelings are natural. As you heal, you will continue to grieve for your child. You will never abandon your caring for your child. You will always be your child's parent, and you will always love your child.

Going on can be a way of showing that life, as it was represented in your child, matters to you. It can be important too for others who love you and depend on you. For your own sake and for the sake of those who need you and love you, you have a responsibility to try to heal. It is extremely difficult to heal from the pain and grief associated with the death of a child.

Most people who do not feel any relief over time are suffering from chronic grief. If you find yourself reviewing the very same memories again and again, and if they always have the same power to distress you, you may wish to seek assistance from a social worker, counselor, or other mental health professional. Acknowledge the concerns of others if they tell you that they think your grief is detrimental or unhealthy, understanding that friends and relatives often significantly underestimate how long it takes for healing to even begin. Grief is a personal experience.

## Literature Available from MADD

All titles available online at [www.madd.org](http://www.madd.org).

**(S)** *Brochure available in Spanish*

## BROCHURES

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- Closed Head Injury (S)**  
*A common complication of vehicular crashes*
- Don't Call Me Lucky (S)**  
*For those injured by drunk drivers*
- Every Child Deserves a Designated Driver (S)**
- Financial Recovery After a Drunk Driving Crash (S)**
- Helping Children Cope with Death (S)**
- How Are You Feeling? (S)**  
*A teen's guide to loss, grief, and healing*
- Living with Burn Trauma**
- Living with Spinal Cord Injury**
- Loss, Pain, and Healing (S)**  
*A parent's guide to grief*
- Men and Mourning (S)**  
*A man's journey through grief*
- Monday Mourning (S)**  
*A guide for the workplace when an employee becomes a crash victim*
- Picking Up the Financial Pieces, Part 1**  
*Managing financial issues at home*
- Picking Up the Financial Pieces, Part 2**  
*Managing work issues after a drunk driving crash*

- Picking Up the Financial Pieces, Part 3**  
*Financial recovery issues in court*
- Selecting a Civil Attorney (S)**
- Someone You Know Drinks and Drives**
- Unique Grief (S)**  
*For the non-family bereaved*
- Victim Information Pamphlet (S)**  
*A guide through the criminal justice system*
- We Hurt Too (S)**  
*For adult siblings*
- Your Grief: You're Not Going Crazy (S)**

## BOOKLETS

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- Death at School**
- Your Victim Impact Statement (S)**  
*A workbook*