



## Duke University Health System Bereavement

### Single Parent Grief – After the Loss of a Child

Whenever a child dies, the result is a broken heart. Grieving the death of a child is a life long process. As a parent, you will always wonder what your child would have been like at every developmental stage of their life.

The feelings and emotions associated with any death are universal. They may include, but not limited to, those of loneliness, emptiness, despair, shock, anger, guilt, shame, sadness, and even depression. Following are some of the unique issues faced by single parents when their child dies.

#### **What can I expect as a single parent?**

Single parents are frequently less likely to have support from others and the child's father may or may not be in your life for emotional support. Whenever the child's father is not in your life, it places an extra burden on your shoulders. It may be more difficult to find someone with whom to share your feelings and pain about the child's death.

Thoughts that may come to mind may include:

- ◆ How is the child's father coping? Does he even care? Does he hurt the way I do?
- ◆ Should I contact the child's father? - Use caution about calling him if there is a possibility of rejection. It is important to protect and take care of yourself during this time.
- ◆ When living with others - a roommate, your parents or other family members - will you be able to find the needed privacy to grieve.
- ◆ Feeling alone in your grief is normal, because only you can experience your pain. It is a lonely process, even when surrounded by others.

#### **How can I coping as a single parent?**

- ◆ Your loss is real – Do not allow anyone to minimize it
  - Your pain is as real as that of parents with partners
  - Remember, no matter the circumstances or your age, you have every right to hurt
- ◆ Find supportive friends and relatives who are willing and able to comfort you. You may want to consider a support group if you find that you are alone to much of the time.
- ◆ Collect and create memories.
  - Keep all cards you receive
  - Create a living memorial for your child – plant a flower garden, a tree, a bush, etc.



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- ◆ **Plan ahead for special days and Holidays - Mother's / Father's day, the child's birthday, death date, Christmas, and special event days. Decide ahead of time how you would like to spend those days and what will make them meaningful for you.**
  - **Share this information with friends and family so that they can help you through those painful days.**
  - **Let people know if talking about the child would be helpful and how you would like the child included or remembered.**
  - **Decide what, if any, changes you would like to make in your traditions. It is OK if you would just like to spend the time alone – reflecting.**
- ◆ **Be prepared for upsurges of your emotions. Feelings and emotions surrounding the death of your child can be quite powerful and hit you unexpectedly. Allow yourself the time to deal with those feelings as you experience them.**
- ◆ **When in pain, it is natural to feel an increased need for touch and closeness. Ask friends and support people for the hugs and touches when and if you need them.**
  - **Consider spiritual support from your clergy.**
  - **Read books that comfort and inspire you.**
  - **Keep a diary, journal, of your thoughts and feelings. You may even want to write letters to the child and share your feelings with him/her**
  - **Consider seeking out a community support group – or other single mothers who have had similar losses and experiences.**

*The death of a child is an important turning point in one's life.  
It changes things and people forever.*