

# The Year of Firsts

Coping with the Death of Your Child

By David Mower

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I was in the copier room when the wall phone rang. I had worked there for several years and never heard that particular phone ring before. Yet, it was ringing now. I had the premonition of bad news even before I started walking over to the phone. With a surreal sense of calm I lifted the receiver to my ear. A voice on the other end said, “Mr. Mower?” and waited for my confirmation. How the company receptionist knew I was in the copier room I never did find out. The voice continued, “Someone wants to talk to you. Please hold.”

Almost instantly, a new voice was on the line stating that the caller was Sergeant somebody and again requesting confirmation I was the person they were trying to reach. He didn’t really have to say anything, as I already “knew” what was coming. “I regret to inform you that your son, Specialist Michael David *Mower* died on active duty at approximately 1:00 am this morning in his barracks at Fort Campbell, Kentucky,” he said in a soft, steady voice. Having delivered the message he paused for the anticipated reaction.

With amazing detachment I asked him what happened. He, of course, did not know (or would not tell) any of the details, as his job was limited to notifying the next of kin – a very tough and thankless duty. I asked if my spouse had been informed and the sergeant said yes; that she had also been called at work and was now on the way home. I was told that the Army’s assigned survival assistance officer would meet us at home and would have information about what happened.

## PURPOSE

Somewhere I heard or read that when you lose a parent you lose part of your past. When you lose your spouse, you lose the present. But when you lose a child, you have lost the future. And when you lose a child, it hurts forever, but, in time, you can learn to cope and adjust and achieve a return to some sense of normalcy and momentum with your life. I write these words from the vantage point of more than a decade’s passing since my son died on 8 September 1992. Between these pages are the lessons I have learned, observations I have made, and insights I have gained that, in passing them along, may they help others who join “The Club”. While the focus is primarily on the death of a child in the family, many of the concepts presented here may also apply to the death of a spouse, parent or other significant person in your life.

## **THE YEAR OF FIRSTS**

The Year of Firsts. That is what I call the 366 days following the death. It's a long year—even has an extra day from a normal calendar year. It runs from the day of death to include the first anniversary day. It is a year where you repeatedly re-encounter and re-live the memories and events of your loved one's loss. The Year of Firsts is the first Thanksgiving without ...; the first Christmas without ...; the first birthday without ...; the first Mother's Day without ...; and so on until you finally get to the first anniversary of the death – the 366<sup>th</sup> day in The Year of Firsts.

It's a year of anguish, anger, hope, fear, frustration, and agony. It's a year of emotional roller coaster rides to hilltops and valley floors. It's a year that seems like it will never end, but its passing is the foundation essential for rebuilding, adjusting, coping, and regaining a sense of normalcy and momentum to your life.

You see, for you—the immediate survivor—the death is not a moment in time, nor even the day the loved one died. It does not end with the funeral. Nor does it end with the last departing well wisher, sympathy card or phone call. The actual death lasts at least through The Year of Firsts.

## **FUNERAL PERIOD AND POST-FUNERAL PERIOD**

The Year of Firsts can be roughly divided into two parts: The *funeral period* and the post-funeral *rest of the year period*. If there is an “easy” part, the funeral period – the first 30 to 45 days – is it. It is “easy” because your senses are numbed by shock at the loss and the impact has yet to fully materialize. It is “easy” because all the energy, adrenaline, activity, excitement, people, cards, calls, decision making, and pace of events consume your time, thoughts, and attention.

This “easy” period – this funeral period – is followed by “the rest of the year” – the nightmare and agony of realization. Initially, in this post funeral period your every idle moment is consumed with thinking about the person you lost. Everything you see, do, or hear seems to directly associate with and remind you of your loved one. The intensity and all absorbing nature of these feelings are hard to communicate to someone not also experiencing the loss at the depth you are. To them, you seem like you are in a different, somehow detached world.

Eventually the post-funeral period devolves into a period of intense loneliness and silence. The phone stops ringing, the cards and letters have all been received, and just when you need someone the most to talk to about your loss, everyone seems to have disappeared. Or if they are still around, they feel they need to give you advice and counsel to hurry your “recovery”, when what you want is just for them to be willing, non-judgmental listeners. People who you thought were your friends quietly start avoiding you either because you no longer fit in

with their life style or they do not know how to deal with you and your situation. You are left to your own means and devices to learn how to cope with your loss.

I think the post-funeral period is the most misunderstood time. Many well meaning people (including many professionals who should know better) think for everyone – the departed, the next of kin, and especially themselves – the death experience ends with the funeral. They put the loss behind them and move on, assuming you also are making the same adjustments. They just go on with their lives. But yours is on hold.

The protective shock in which your system has wrapped you during the funeral period is replaced by the painful realization that your life has been changed forever. You pray there has been a mistake and that you will wake up any minute and everything will be all right. Your loved one will walk through the front door any moment now. But it is not a dream; the door does not open; and nothing is right. The silence is deafening. And the first special occasions (birthday, anniversary, holiday, etc.) is rapidly approaching. How will you ever get through it?

## **UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF BIRTHDAYS, HOLIDAYS, ANNIVERSARIES AND SPECIAL OCCASIONS**

It's the continuous stream of remembrance occasions though out the year which gives title to "The Year of Firsts". Each occasion serves as a reminder of the loss of your child and tends to renew and refresh the events of the death and funeral details. You start to dread the next coming occasion and often the inclination is to refrain from participating. This leads to a spiraling isolation, withdrawal, sense of loneliness and depression. The Year of Firsts is the absolute worst period in dealing with your grief because you don't have any experience on what to do or how to handle these special occasions. Consequently they tend to become emotional disasters that only serve to deepen and prolong your grieving.

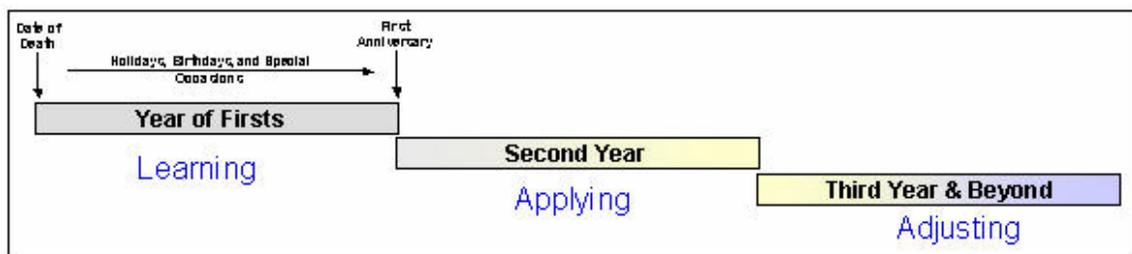


Figure 1 – Grief Cycle

This simple chart illustrates my version of a "Grief Cycle". Most grief cycle charts illustrate the typical order and common range of emotional affects grieving humans go through following a personal tragedy. Some of them will include expected durations and intensity levels, but none of them illustrate the "way

ahead” – how do you break out of the emotional cycle to restore a semblance of normalcy to your daily life.

I call it a Grief Cycle chart because the real cycle is the recurring events that trigger our grieving emotions and remembrances. It also illustrates why you “can’t get over it” in just a few weeks or months. Two things commonly come together after a significant personal tragedy and loss that conspire against a short period of adjustment. The first is the fact that you do not have any experience or training in how to deal with the loss, so you feel unable to cope. The second fact is that your family, friends, and acquaintances tend to avoid a grieving person so that you wind up alone in dealing with the situation just when you most need support.

As the Figure 1 suggests, “getting over it” is a long term process. It is my observation that the period of adjustment and learning to cope with and adjust to a significant loss is actually in the 3 to 7 year range. Certainly 3 full years is a minimum for an individual under ideal conditions. It also certainly is longer for situations where people are involved in a loss with extenuating circumstances, lack emotional support, and do not have insight into the grieving cycle.

Your experiences in dealing with these occasions during The Year of Firsts become the foundation on which you learn to cope and adjust with the loss in future years. I don’t believe that “time heals” – at least not in the case of a child’s death – but time does allow the accumulation of experiences in dealing with occasions that allow you to better cope with the loss.

### **BENEFITING FROM THE YEAR OF FIRSTS EXPERIENCES**

The loss of your child has broken your paradigm. Nothing is or ever will be the same again. You cannot put it back together, but you must go on. The key to your future lays in the brokenness. With brokenness comes the need for repair and repair requires you to take action. The action necessary is simply called “planning”. As you look at the calendar for the next year and see events coming up that will be associated with your loss, create a plan for each of those occasions. It does not have to be anything complex, but it must have at least 3 parts: a start, your planned/controlled activities, and an end. The plan serves many purposes:

1. It provides the basis for how you will deal with the event now and in all future years.
2. It provides purpose and focus so that you have control over the event
3. It provides the opportunity to set a positive atmosphere
4. It bounds the event so that it does not become an open-ended emotional episode. With a specific start time and a stop time, you know when it starts and when it’s over.
5. It can be used to memorialize your child or spouse and ensure their memory is carried on; their life and death has a positive impact.

6. It provides the opportunity to start new traditions to replace those that are broken or no longer appropriate.

The first event plan is the hardest one. Everything seems to be in shambles. You don't think you will ever feel better. You don't have any desire or energy. You may think you cannot go on. However, you will find that planning that first event is the first step in bringing your life back under control and giving it purpose and direction. It is also the opportunity to make something good, something positive come from the loss of your child or spouse.

Let's take a closer look at each of the above points.

*"It provides the basis for how you will deal with the event now and in all future years."* This is your opportunity to start new traditions. We decided that as a family we wanted our events and memories to honor, glorify and memorialize our son and brother, Michael, in a way that would make us want to participate in keeping his memory alive. The first event after his death was Thanksgiving. Our "plan" was to have a few close friends over for Thanksgiving and to recount stories and share memories we each held. While we didn't have any rules for what stories to tell, we hoped people would keep them upbeat. Our daughter volunteered the first "Mike-story" which, now in her retrospect was a humorous incident, but importantly set the stage and tone for the rest of the stories and for the Thanksgiving dinner. We did have our somber moments and our moments of prayer and thanksgiving, but we accomplished what we set out to do – get through the first holiday. That first Thanksgiving became a new tradition with us, it lasted until our daughters both left home, and it set the attitude with which we would face all the rest of the special events to come.

*"It provides purpose and focus so that you have control over the event."* With the loss of a child, you tend to sense a complete loss of control over everything. The overwhelming feeling is helplessness. Everything is out of whack. The normal order is upset. Children are not supposed to die first; the parents are. That's the natural order. From one generation to the next and so on. The idea of developing a plan is to put you back in control of events; to restore your confidence that you are not helpless and that you can regain purpose and focus. Events left to manage themselves can quickly turn into pity parties and often spiral downward to emotional bouts of depression. The purpose and focus must be aimed at celebrating the life and contribution of the child or spouse. A pastor once suggested that life is like a track meet. Some people run sprints and some run marathons. The "prize" is the same regardless. Well, it may not be the best analogy, but it does suggest that life no matter how short the sprint or

where along the marathon route the runner fell out is not a wasted effort unless we the living let it be wasted.

*“It provides the opportunity to set a positive atmosphere.”*

The easy part of grieving is feeling bad – you just have to let your feelings take over and follow their lead down into despair, guilt, hopelessness, anger and self pity. The hard part is finding energy to feel good. Deliberate planning of an event means you can set the tone and mood. Include in your plans activities that will be uplifting and encouraging. Guard against those types of events that have significant potential to renew anguish and grief. A simple example is an event with festive, bright colored balloons instead of black balloons. Invite friends who have demonstrated the insight, ability and willingness to give you positive support, instead of those people who reinforce your feelings of grief or guilt through their attitude or unkind or careless words.

We made a special effort to become familiar with the names on the stones and monuments in the area around our son. That is his “new community”. We noticed one stone a couple of plots over had the names of a father, mother and two children all with the same date of death. There never appeared to be any indications of visitors, so we started including a flower for them when we when to visit our son’s grave. In hind sight, it seems that by including our son in a “community” helped to ease the focus on the loneliness and isolation of his specific grave and imparted a sense of peace; a sense that he was among “friends” and no longer alone when we were not physically present.

*“It bounds the event so that it does not become an open-ended emotional episode. With a specific start time and a stop time, you know when it starts and when over.”*

Regaining control over your life is a first priority. It is a key to breaking the grieving cycle and regaining a sense of normalcy. When events are left uncontrolled, they tend to get out of hand and then only bad experiences happen. When this cycle is repeated over and over again, you come to dread each approaching calendar date. For instance, you may have completed the funeral period and have a sense of peace and acceptance, and, at the urging of friends and family, appear be “getting over it”. But a major event comes up on the calendar that you will now be experiencing for the first time without your child’s participation. It may be a birthday, or Thanksgiving, or Christmas, or other significant event. Suddenly, what has always been a period of joy and excitement is a devastating experience as the memories of what can no longer be come flooding back and the permanency of your loss is driven home. Even before the day arrives you start emotional swings that intensify until you have no energy left for any activity except renewed and deepened grief. What should be a

one day happy event turns into a week of mourning, anger, grief and depression.

For these reasons, it's vital to "bound" the event, control its beginning and end, and ensuring that the activities are reassuring and positive. By setting a start time, you establish an expectation for yourself of acceptable (tolerable) emotions approaching the event. As the day approaches, you can assure yourself that if you make it to the start of the planned event you will have the love and support of family and friends present who will help you get through the event thus avoid encountering the calendar day alone with your grieving emotions.

The same is important with setting an end time for the event. While the tone of the event should be up beat, that does not mean you don't or won't experience a range of grieving emotions. But, when the event ends, you need to rein back in your grieving emotions and resume the day-to-day responsibilities of relationships and family care or work. By setting an end time, you have permitted yourself a needed period of remembrance and grieving, but have achieved control over the intensity and duration with understanding that you will have an opportunity to privately or publicly grieve again when the next event comes around.

The idea of bounded events is the compromise between the two extremes – extremes that are both destructive and debilitating – excessive grieving and stoicism. Bounded events permit healthy and necessary grieving while providing a supporting environment and a closure to the event. Bounded events become the new traditions base used to cope with their recurrence in the coming years.

*"It can be used to memorialize your child or spouse and ensure their memory is carried on; their life and death has a positive impact."*

Above I alluded to the loss of a child as losing one's future. The loss of promises unfulfilled. The loss of what could have been. The loss of dreams dreamed. I also suggest above that a child's life is not a wasted effort unless we, the living, let it be wasted. Memorializing your child's life is a way to ensure that their tenure in this world continues to endure. Many crusading efforts have resulted from parents endeavoring to use their child life and death for a higher purpose. For example:

- *America's Most Wanted*. AMW was started by the family of Adam Walsh, a 6 year old who was abducted and murdered. Adam was abducted from a suburban shopping mall. For 16 days, a frantic search followed until Adam's remains were discovered more than 100 miles from his home. The prime suspect in Adam's murder, Ottis Toole, was never charged in the case. The Walsh's turned their grief into action and without a badge or a gun, John Walsh

quickly became a nationally recognized leader in the push for victims' rights. In 1987, FOX contacted John about hosting a groundbreaking new reality show designed to track down the country's most notorious and dangerous fugitives by profiling their cases to a national audience. ([www.amw.com](http://www.amw.com))

- *MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving)*. Although Candy Lightner is probably the best known of MADD's organizers, MADD was established by a group of women in California outraged after the death of a teenage girl killed by a repeat-offender drunk driver. Launched into activism through the tragedy of her family's three separate drunk driving crashes, Wendy Hamilton's leadership experience and passionate personal convictions are the foundation for her position as MADD's National President. ([www.madd.org](http://www.madd.org))
- *The Compassionate Friends*. The Compassionate Friends was founded in Coventry, England, in 1969, following the deaths of two young boys, Billy Henderson and Kenneth Lawley, the previous spring. Billy and Kenneth had died just three days apart in the Coventry and Warwickshire Hospital where Rev. Simon Stephens was Assistant to the Chaplain. Simon mentioned Billy's death to Iris and Joe Lawley, and the Lawleys decided to send flowers to Billy's funeral. They signed the card simply, "Kenneth's parents," realizing that the Hendersons would know who they were. Bill and Joan Henderson then invited the Lawleys over for tea, and an immediate bond was formed as the two couples spoke freely about their boys, sharing their memories and the dreams that had died with Billy and Kenneth. They continued to get together regularly, and young Rev. Stephens, then only 23, encouraged them to invite other newly bereaved parents to join them. In 1969, another grieving mother accepted their invitation to meet with Simon and the two couples. They decided to organize as a self-help group and actively begin reaching out to newly bereaved parents in their community. Because the word "compassionate" kept coming up, this new organization was called "The Society of the Compassionate Friends." ([www.compassionatefriends.com](http://www.compassionatefriends.com))

These three examples are a few of the more recognizable memorialization efforts. Your efforts don't have to be on this scale to achieve meaningful impact. In our own case, we joined together with another family in our church that also lost their son, Mike. Together we established, in 1996, the Saint Michaels Youth Endowment Fund, dedicated to supporting the youth of our church, community and the world. The endowment starting

with about \$10,000 initial seed money to date has grown to about \$113,000 in principle and distributes about \$6,000 in earnings annually to support youth activities, scholarships, programs and activities.

(<http://www.stmarks-elca.org/endowment-youth.asp>)

The point is, do something. Your child's promise does not have to end with the funeral. By establishing or contributing to a work in their name, their contribution and memory live on in a productive and meaningful way that otherwise would not have happened. Some efforts change the lives of other individuals. Some change society. As organ donations may extend a life in need, memorialization activities extend your child's life contribution. You, too, will find the memorialization efforts therapeutic and fulfilling.

*"It provides the opportunity to start new traditions to replace those that are broken or no longer appropriate."*

Starting new traditions is the essential activity needed to form long term coping skills dealing with your loss. The old traditions may be broken or no longer appropriate and trying to force them to be what they were is not likely to work. Old traditions carried forward often revive the sense of loss and renew the emotional grieving process. Establishing new traditions forms the foundation on which you build your long term coping routine and gain experience in dealing with special dates and events. These new traditions represent your new relationship with your child. It is, therefore, essential that when you plan the activities that are to become your new traditions, you ensure that they have a positive atmosphere and reassurance in the value and worth of both your child and you.

## **MANY MARRIAGES DON'T SURVIVE THE LOSS OF A CHILD**

I don't have a specific reference or source, but generally, about 80% of marriages incurring the death of a child end in divorce. Relationships necessary to a marriage are frequently overwhelmed by the emotional demands of individual grieving experiences.

For example, a grieving mother who has all she can do to maintain her own emotional self control, must use precious energy to comfort and support her husband and her other children, cook and maintain the house, etc..

Men tend to grieve in silence while women tend to want to talk – mutually exclusive tactics.

Children are afraid and need reassurance, out of a sense of upsetting their parent frequently won't ask for the support they need or talk about the concerns they have. Parent's will often times take the lack of questions as a sign that the child is okay, when the child is actually very distressed.

Guilt, blame, sense of failure and extenuating circumstances may stew the mix even more. Marriage relationships, understandably, are often the first casualty after the death of a child.

It takes extraordinary effort to maintain a marriage in The Year of Firsts.

## **A SENSE OF FAILURE**

Along with many of the well understood emotions associated with grieving, such as anger, guilt, despair, hopelessness, etc., I think there is one other emotion that parents in particular experience to one degree or another—the sense of being a failure or failing.

As parents we spend our life protecting our children from harm and trauma. When they die, internally we have a sense that we failed in our principle responsibility. But the truth of the matter is that most situations are beyond our control to prevent, change, or fix. Blaming ourselves as being personally responsible for a loss beyond our control is adding a very serious, destructive burden unnecessarily to our emotionally stressed psyche.

It can create a pit of depression from which there is no escape resulting in the waste of our own life. We are not God. We cannot control everything that goes on. Sometimes stuff just happens. Bad stuff even happens to good people. No

matter what you could have done, he or she would have died anyway because God knows the number of our days. We don't understand why someone "had to die", but we do have responsibility to make sure the person's life was not lived in vain by dedicating our efforts to continue their unfinished work.

Guilt is often as much of an excuse for inaction as it is self pity. If you truly believe you have failed, then you have a call to action to see that what can be set right is set right. In neither situation do you have a license for sitting around doing nothing but feeling bad and depressed.

## TAKE A VACATION.

In the third year of our grief, we were worn out spiritually, emotionally, and physically. We finally reached the point where we needed a “new start;” a “fresh chance;” a “we gotta get out of this rut” opportunity. We settled on the idea of a family vacation – not just an ordinary vacation, but a vacation that was extraordinary ... something we would probably never otherwise consider or do. It had to be something that would break us out of our melancholy lives and restore us to the excitement and wonder of life. We also took the approach that the vacation should honor our son’s life; not be an attempt to hide or forget him.

We developed a few rules for planning the vacation:

- It had to be someplace on which we all agreed
- It had to be someplace where we would probably never otherwise go
- It had to be someplace that our son would also have loved to visit since reason for going was to up lift us all
- It had to be “all expenses paid” ... we wanted a packaged deal in which we could just enjoy ourselves without worrying if we were going to run out of money, etc. – something we could afford to pay for up front so that we would not come back to the bills
- It had to be free from all phones, business, and other personal interruptions

We took about six months to plan the trip. There were several objectives in this approach: build excitement (it took time to get motivated, and start doing the research); get everyone talking again (restore communications); remember our son (we had to agree it was a place that he would have liked); arrange the time off and resources to cover the cost (since it was to be a “rebirth” we didn’t want to cut corners, so we financed it from savings accounts, loose change jars, and a bit of up front credit card charging that was paid off before the trip started).

As we looked at all the cruise opportunities, group hosted trips, vacation resorts, etc., we narrowed it down to a vacation resort in the Caribbean – not so far away we would be spending all the time traveling, but far enough that we would be free and relaxed. We could fly there in a day. It was a beachfront resort. It was highly rated. It was an exotic trip with lots of advertised activities and things to do – if we felt so inclined. It was a trip where we were treated and pampered like royalty by the resort staff, (Yeah, you can really find those places.)

It worked for us. Just an idea. But if you find yourself in a rut ... try a “breakout” vacation.

## DEALING WITH THOSE “YEAR OF FIRSTS” QUESTIONS

People are going to ask you “innocent” questions that before your loss would have been given a quick, easy, ready answer. Now those questions suddenly become very complicated and painful to answer. The best defense is to know the type of questions people are going to ask and have prepared your possible responses ahead of time. Here are some that we faced:

### 1. **How many children do you have?**

This is a toughie. It used to be simple and easy to answer. “I have three”. Then the usual questions would follow about how old they are, where they are, what are they doing, etc. - The stuff that typically is ice-breaker material to get conversation started with casual acquaintances and strangers.

But when you lose a child that changes everything. It is no longer a question that is spontaneously answered. In fact, it can be a question that parents dread to have come up. Whether answered or unanswered, it repeatedly forces the parent to squarely face the fact that one of their children is missing; is no long alive. It is a question that can drive a parent into isolation because of the fear and anxiety of facing such questions.

There is no “perfect” answer to the question, but anticipating that people are going to ask you the question and that it will often come up in unexpected situations, you need to have prepared some stock answers that you can draw on depending on the individual, situation, and context of the question.

I have at least three answers that I use based on who is asking, the situation and the context in which the question is asked. None of these are simple answers. They almost always involve further explanation.

- a. I have three.
- b. I have two.
- c. I have two living. We lost our son, Mike.

A and B are used in situations where I am involved in casual conversation with strangers who have no prior knowledge of our family. A or B is used depending on how I feel emotionally about the discussing the loss with the person I am talking too, because there are likely to be follow up inquiries as to what the kids are doing, etc. With A, I may have to explain one died. With B, I can limit the discussion to the two daughters, and move the conversation on to another topic.

Some people believe B is never an appropriate answer as it denigrates the lost child's memory, but I have come to the conclusion that sometimes privacy is a right of the child as well as the adult. Not all people who are asking really want all that information – they are just trying to make conversation; and some people are gossips who would spread and twist anything you tell them at inappropriate times, in inappropriate places or to other people.

Option C is used when I feel comfortable with the person I am talking to and feel the need to talk about the loss of Mike.

Of course there is Option D – ignore the question and turn the answer elsewhere: “They are all fine and doing very well, thank you. Tell me about your family.”

## **2. How are you / is your spouse?**

Like the question above and those below, the answer has as much to do with who is asking as it does with how you feel about talking. In a grieving situation you are working so hard at keeping yourself emotionally together, that you may be neglecting the needs of your spouse for your emotional support. So no matter who asks the question, take a second to reflect on how you and your spouse are working through the loss – TOGETHER.

- a. It's a stranger making conversation**
- b. It's a friend or acquaintance who is making a passing inquiry**
- c. It's a concerned friend or relative**

For A, I generally take it as idle conversation and say something like “fine” and move on. The stranger probably isn't even aware of the situation or the how emotionally charged the question actually is.

For B, I may again give a perfunctorily “fine” or I may take the opportunity to “talk” a little bit. Talking is great therapy and if it's the right person, I might engage in an expanded conversation. Just remember it's a conversation, not a paid therapy session. Don't “dump” everything that you feel or are concerned about on the other person.

For C, if you have a trustworthy friend or relative who is willing to listen to you occasionally unburden your concerns, cares, and emotions without offering judgment, criticism, unwanted advice, or spreading gossip, you surely should take the opening to talk about those things that are bothering you. On the other hand, just because a close friend or relative is concerned, does not mean that you have to unconditionally tell them everything or anything.

Bottom line, is that these types of questions are situational and you have to determine which type of response best fits the situation. It is possible to drive away even good and close friends by always being negative, overly emotional, or “dumping” on them. Remember for most people the emotional loss ended with the funeral, and they have moved on. Often the question about how are you or your spouse is not a true inquiry about the details of how you feel or what you are going through. It’s more likely to be a “check in” to see if you have finally “moved on” also and the old relationship with them can be resumed as normal.

### **3. What Happened?**

To explain or not explain, that is the question. Talking about the loss is great therapy and free (unless you are talking to a professional counselor). My rule of thumb is that I am generally willing to talk about what happened. How much I talk, the amount of details I reveal, etc., is situational dependent on who I am talking with, how I am feeling, and the other person’s “need to know”.

When I talk about what happened, I like to use my son’s name rather than just refer to him in the third person as if I was a detached observer. He still is, after all, my son.

### **4. I Know How You Feel.**

Probably not, unless they too have experienced the loss of a child. Strangely enough, this attempt at trying to be empathic often has the opposite effect on the parents and typically wells up an emotion of anger. So what do you do when someone well meaning makes such an announcement.

- a. Explode in anger.**
- b. Ignore the statement.**
- c. Gently explain that it’s unlikely the person is experiencing the loss at the same emotional depth as you are.**
- d. Thank them for their understanding and support and change the subject.**

Option d is my preferred response, while internally I may be having a silent discussion about what I would really like to say. As I mentioned above, for most people the death is history for them when the funeral is over. They may still have a sense of loss and sadness at the death of your child because they still see you are hurting, but the loss doesn’t “control” their life like it controls yours.

When someone offers the comparison of feelings, it causes you to assess how you actually are feeling and mentally match that to what you see in the other person. Part of your anger is your desire to feel “normal” again. The person making the statement probably looks and is feeling “normal”

and adjusted. You aren't. You can't. And you won't be for a very long time. Recognize that this statement is well intentioned, if mis-guided, and let it go at that. You need all the support you can get and don't want to drive off people who are willing to talk to you about the loss of your child.

**5.**

## WHAT ABOUT MY FAITH?

Marriages and faith in God both take a beating when the death of a child is involved. Both are put to a very strong test. The common plea is “How can a loving God let my child die?”

“I’ve lost my child. I’ve lost my marriage. I’ve lost my faith in God.” That about sums up the struggles facing a surviving parent. No wonder we can’t just “get over it”. Where does one turn? Your spouse is probably gone. Your friends are probably avoiding you in your grief. And you no longer feel you can trust and depend on the one sure rock, God. You feel as if you just cannot go on any longer.

But, what about your faith? Yes, you are probably angry with God. You probably shout and swear, plead and beg, and yet answers don’t appear to come. Or do they...?

In our grief we tend not to be good listeners. In our grief we want to strike out, so we are not in a receptive mood. In our grief, we want to assign blame, so we are not willing to accept peace and comfort from the target of our anger. Grief builds a wall of emotions around us that makes it difficult for two-way conversation with the Lord. Its times like that when every grieving parent needs a gift of “FootPrints”.

One night a man had a dream. He dreamed he was walking along the beach with the LORD.

Across the sky flashed scenes from his life. For each scene, he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand; one belonged to him and the other to the LORD. When the last scene of his life flashed before him, he looked back at the footprints in the sand.

He noticed that many times along the path of his life there was only one set of footprints. He also noticed that it happened at the very lowest and saddest times in his life.

This really bothered him and he questioned the LORD about it.

"LORD, you said that once I decided to follow you, you'd walk with me all the way, but I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life there was only one set of footprints. I don't understand why, when I needed you most, you would leave me."

The LORD replied, "My precious child, I love you and I would never leave you. During your times of trial and suffering, when you saw only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you."

[The original name of this poem was "I Had a Dream". It was written at Echo Lake Bible Camp near Kingston Ontario Canada during a Color Weekend Youth Retreat in 1964. The poem is now called "Footprints." Copyright 1964, Margaret Fishback Powers.]

The Lord does not lose faith in us. Regaining your faith and trust in the Lord God, is as with any relationship. It takes time and two-way conversation. Notwithstanding, your faith is essential to coping with the loss of your child. While in this human condition we perish, none are lost to God in the Eternal condition. In the Lord is our hope for reunion. To lose your faith entirely is to lose hope entirely. While do rarely find understanding as to why our child died, we can find comfort, hope and acceptance in the Word of God about our future together. The eternal future is a lot longer than the temporal present. We have much for which to be thankful.

-----→End for now

## **NOTES: Organization Thoughts and Things I still Need to Write About....**

### Dealing with Well-Meaning but Stupid Comments

- I know how you feel
- Well, he (or she) is in a better place now
- You need to get over it and move on
- It was God's will
- At least you still have your other children
- Well at least you had xx years with him/her
- You can always have another child
- When are you going to remarry?

### Dealing with Changes in Relationships

- Friends who now avoid you
- No longer fitting in
- New friends
- Surviving Kin
  - o You
  - o Your Spouse
  - o Your other children
- 

### 3-7 years Period of Adjustment

- You will never "get over it"
- You will learn to adjust and to deal with it
- Time doesn't heal, but it does allow the accumulation of experience

### First Year

- The first 30-45 days – the easy part.
- The Rest of the First Year – the long night of adjustment: End of Cards, Letters, Phone Calls, and Visits

### Second Year

- Learn from the Year of Firsts
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### Third Year and after

- Building on the first two years' experiences
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