



Complicated grief among parents after the death of a child

The death of a child is one of the most difficult experiences a parent can have. Taking good care of their children is almost always the most important thing in a parents' lives. A child's death triggers feelings of caregiving failure even when it's really not true. Self-blaming thoughts are virtually universal after a child dies. However, if a parent gets caught up in these kinds of thoughts, this can derail the adaptation process and lead to complicated grief. The highest rates of complicated grief occur in parents whose children have died.

Intense emotions like sadness, anger, guilt and despair invade the lives of parents coping with a child's death and these may be difficult to regulate. Life is transformed and may seem empty and confusing. Answering a simple question such as "How many children do you have?" is suddenly a problem.

Bereaved parents typically wrestle with difficult questions such as "Why did this happen?" or "Why didn't I prevent it?" or, sometimes, "Why was my child so reckless or negligent?" These kinds of thoughts and feelings contribute to development of complicated grief and need to be resolved in order for grief to find a place in a parent's life.

A bereaved couple may find themselves unable to support each other after a painful shared experience. Their different ways of grieving may seem jarring to each other. One parent may long to talk about the child and their feelings, while the other parent may feel determined to avoid these very discussions. Conflicting needs can deprive a couple of the support they need from each other causing stress in the relationship and adding to the pain of the loss.

A parent may cherish memories of the child or long for the memories

they had hoped to build. Parents may wonder if it is right to feel joy after the loss of a child. They may question whether restoration of a happy, satisfying life is appropriate since their child has been deprived of these. Those who can't imagine a meaningful life or find a way to restore their sense of purpose, joy and satisfaction may be suffering from complicated grief. If so, complicated grief treatment holds the promise of help.