

The impact of grief on parents' relationships  
after the sudden death of their child.



*guiding light*

# When Relationships Hurt, Too



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Grief and Loss

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The impact of grief on parents' relationships after the sudden death of their child

Petra Nicolette den Hartog, in collaboration with bereaved parents and Red Nose Grief and Loss.

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In Memory of Lillian Samantha O'Shannessy Goding 4/04/2007-23/02/2010

Forever loved and never forgotten daughter and granddaughter. Missed immensely by older brother Ethan. Her memory will live on through Lillian's older brother and younger sister Giuliana.

When relationships hurt, too. The impact of grief on parents' relationships after the sudden death of their child.

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# Introduction

In our society we are often ill prepared to deal with grief. The death of a child is so unexpected that few of us have had time to think, let alone talk, about these issues.

Most bereaved parents perceive their most significant support as coming from within the immediate family, particularly their partner. The next most significant support comes from extended family and friends, followed by bereavement organisations and support groups.

This booklet is an additional resource. It shares the thoughts of parents who have experienced the sudden and unexpected death of a baby or young child from SIDS, accident, sudden onset illness, stillbirth and other perinatal deaths.

The parents in this booklet hope that their experiences will help guide you, whether you are a single parent or part of a couple, in a same-sex or heterosexual relationship, in understanding the impact the death has had on your relationships with each other, family members, friends, colleagues and others in your networks.

They have shared what helped them to cope and what would have helped them to cope better. In addition, they have reflected on how the death helped them to grow as individuals and ultimately strengthened some of their relationships and families.

In the early days, it could be too hard to concentrate on all the information in this booklet. Some of it might not apply to you especially if you are not currently in a relationship. Please start by focusing on the sections most relevant to you.

The first part of this booklet is concerned with the early stages of grief, particularly its impact on you, your partner, other family members and close friends. The second addresses the process of moving forward, the challenges in confronting change and various strategies for coping with it. This is followed by stories of the journey through grief of several couples and some individual parents.



## Part 1: The journey begins

To outlive your child goes against the natural order of things, so that the death of your child is probably the hardest thing that you will ever have to manage. It is the ultimate loss: of hopes and dreams, of a part of you as a parent, of a role and purpose in society, and of an enriched family life. It has the potential to create lifelong changes in you, your family and your networks.

Absorbed in your grief, and confused about what to expect, you could feel out of control, isolated and indecisive, lacking the energy to help either yourself or your partner. The natural resilience, which helped you to cope with challenges in the past, might seem to have deserted you and the simplest of everyday tasks can feel overwhelming.

*“We had both felt so much pain that I thought it would kill us. When I realised that it wasn’t going to, I prayed that it would.”* Jenny R

*“In the beginning it is normal to feel devastated. I constantly had the need to be told that what I was experiencing was normal.”* Glenn

*“I was completely absorbed by my grief, except for looking after my other children. I felt numb; life just passed me by.”* Eva

Rest assured, it need not always be this way. You can take control of your life and gradually transform it, but this will take time, tax your patience and understanding and confound your expectations.

*“It will be like torture, there will be so much pain. You fear that you will never be yourself again but you will return to your essential core - become more yourself again. Give yourself time. It could take years or months ... but accept that you will laugh and find meaning in life once again.”* Jo



“ Time does change your grief – it won’t disappear but it won’t dominate your life as it does in the beginning. Be patient, especially in the first six months. Life does go back to [a new?] normal.” [Robert O’N](#)

“ I think Sharyaka’s death has taught me to value people and relationships much more. I was never particularly materialistic, but now I see more than ever the value of people and of life.”  
[Bas](#)

“ We have a more equal relationship now, we are less controlling, one in which we are more able to pursue our own interests.” [Fiona and Kerri](#)

“ Be patient! Grief is a long and painful process, perhaps endless, but the way you deal with it and the way it affects your life and relationships, change with time.” [Amy](#)

# You and your partner

Rocked by grief, many couples fear that their relationship will be in jeopardy, or even break down permanently. Most individuals have little energy for themselves, let alone their partner, while others become frenetic and self-absorbed. This is hardly surprising, especially if this is the first major loss for either or both partners. However, contrary to this fear, most relationships do not break down after the death of a child, nor are they any more likely to do so than in non-bereaved families.

**“ We have come through one of the biggest tests of any relationship. We have survived the most treacherous terrain and it was damned hard. We shared it together, horrible as it was. It has brought us closer together than perhaps it would otherwise have been.”** [Jenny R](#)

**“ After many hard days and a lot of hard work, our relationship is stronger, more considerate and more compassionate than it ever has been and even though I would give it up in a flash to have Ines back, I try to look at it as something she taught us.”** [Helene](#)

It will take time for each of you to work out how to grieve, how much space to give each other, and how to express your feelings, communicate your needs and be truly supportive. The following are some of the experiences that you and your partner are likely to have.

## The risk of misunderstanding the other person's responses

You might grieve together and support each other equally in the beginning. However, it is more likely that at times you will be too preoccupied with your own feelings to understand those of your partner. Some people, for example, internalise grief as a way of shielding others from its intensity, a risky practice as it can create the impression of not grieving at all.





“ Wayne and I just clung together. I only wanted to talk to him, nobody else.” Deanne

“ When I was up, he was down and I could help him, and when I was down, he was able to be supportive and soothing.” Jo

“ I knew Andrew was hurting as much as I was, so I tried to be ‘good’ so as not to upset him. Never did the two of us cry together. I couldn’t bear the thought of us weeping together. I would think, ‘If you’re going to cry, don’t do it in front of me, because I am sick of crying’. I think it was almost wrong not to have a really good weep together. We were constantly trying to be brave in front of the other.” Susan

“ It is so hard to be compassionate to your partner’s needs. You might have just gone through hours when you felt so low and you might be coming out of it a bit and then it is your partner’s turn and it is so hard to be dragged back into it. In an ideal world, you would be as open and as responsive to your partner as you possibly could.” Peter

“ It is important to keep communication going. People grieve differently and you are so consumed with your own grief that you have not much to give to anybody else. It is easy to take exception and misconstrue your partner’s reactions.” Wendy

As you struggle to cope with your own feelings and the everyday demands of living, work, other children and various family members, it is easy to feel distant from one another or shut out. Sometimes this leads to extreme or atypical behaviour, causing division and resentment, especially if you seem to be functioning or coping better than your partner.

“ One of the hardest things I’ve found out after the death of a child is the pressure to keep managing your life. You have to act as a worker, as a dad, as a husband, and as a person in your own right as well.” Bas

**“ We lived very separate lives, had different interests. I felt shut out by him, feeling he didn’t want to spend time with me. A chasm was developing between us and I feared losing him as well.” Naomi**

Some parents only allow themselves to grieve when they feel that their partner is ‘okay again’, when there is less fear about being overwhelmed by grief. This can happen years later and be quite a shock.

**“ It wasn’t until two years after Izak died, when I didn’t know what was happening and didn’t understand how I was feeling ... I thought I had dealt with my grief, but the truth was I hadn’t even begun to deal with it and that’s when I realised it might help to know how others had coped with the death of a child ... I wanted to talk to other blokes who knew what I was going through.” Mark**

It is important to understand that there is no right or wrong way to grieve. The grieving process is an extremely personal journey that no two people will undertake in the same way. The intensity of your feelings, your capacity to share them and the ways in which you try to cope can all differ radically. This is particularly true of the early stages of grief, which will test your relationships and capacity for understanding each other’s grief.

## Heightened emotions

Your response is likely to be compounded by powerful and often conflicting emotions, such as guilt, shame, anger and blame, affecting your physical and emotional wellbeing. In these circumstances, it can be difficult to share your feelings with your partner.

The intensity of such feelings, together with sadness about the death, can leave you feeling out of control, leading to panic attacks. You might fear further deaths, as the world now seems to be a frightening, less predictable place. In turn you could feel so unworthy and responsible for the death that you fear that your partner will leave you. Intense flashbacks of the death can recur unexpectedly, increasing your feelings of being out of control and quite fearful.



“ He realised he couldn't help me. I couldn't fix it and neither could he. We couldn't control our responses. Samuel's death threw us against the wall; it was so unexpected and so horrific. We couldn't plan for it or engineer it or manage it” [Jenny R](#)

“ I had panic attacks and still do. I don't cope with that sort of stress. I used to be stoic but now, when I hear a strange noise at night, I react irrationally and full of fear. The emotional response is not now one about Alex's death, but a lasting response to stress.” [George](#)

“ He saw my grief as like a huge black hole and if he got too close, he too would fall in and be all consumed and be lost. He couldn't support me.” [Tracey](#)

“ In the beginning your partner can remind you of the grief and it will be tempting to walk away.” [Leanne](#)

## Guilt and shame

Parents often experience guilt, even when they know rationally that there was nothing they could have done to prevent the death. The guilt can be about the genes they gave their child, their inability to protect their child from harm, the times they weren't there for them, or the medical choices they made. The decision to turn off the life support is particularly traumatic.

Mothers often feel that their bodies let them down, that in some way they are responsible for the death of their baby and should have been more aware and focussed on staying strong and healthy. People often feel they are being punished for past actions, such as abortions or medical terminations for foetal abnormality. They go over and over the events in their head, fearing that they are going mad. Fathers often believe that they let their family down, failing as a provider and protector. These feelings are hard to talk about with others, let alone admit them to yourself.

“ My primary feeling was one of shame – that I somehow caused the death because of abortions I had when I was much younger. Was this God’s punishment? I lost all confidence in myself and my self-esteem plummeted. My husband couldn’t understand and became impatient with me.” [Nicolette](#)

“ The thing that I see about a child dying is that you feel more acute guilt as a mother as I was responsible for his wellbeing. I ask myself, ‘What could I have done to change the outcome?’” [Wendy](#)

“ I needed answers as to why Samuel died and my husband, Paul, didn’t. I kept rehashing what I may have done wrong. Did I overheat him? Intellectually I knew there was no point in doing this, but emotionally I had to do it. Paul would get exasperated with me and say, ‘Don’t go there!’ Although I knew too that it couldn’t achieve anything, I still needed to go through the process of trying to understand, or make sense of, Samuel’s death.” [Jenny R](#)

“ Guilt was something we both felt. Michael felt he should have been more in charge and that he had let his family down. I felt guilt that my body had let me down.” [Jessica](#)

“ I felt very guilty that I had let Leanne down, that I had failed as a father. This was a tough pill to swallow.” [George](#)

“ I felt totally overwhelmed. I had failed as a father: I had been brought up to be a provider and protector ... now I was haemorrhaging to death. I had no one to talk to and felt under enormous pressure, as if I was going to implode. My wife was a mess and surrounded by family and friends, but what about me?” [Glenn](#)



*“ Adam has moved through the stages of grief in a different way, quicker or in a different order or he is to the point where he doesn't go over things the way I do. He doesn't feel the guilt and I think that's a mother thing with the guilt of my own pregnancy and labour.” Lyndal*

## Anger and blame

Feeling angry is understandable, given the seemingly senseless nature of what has happened. Unfortunately, the more you question the angrier you become, particularly if your partner misunderstands the strength of your emotions or is frightened by them. The intensity of your feelings can be overwhelming.

*“ Everything seemed to go wrong; the universe didn't seem to be on my side any more. I kept making mistakes and all of this made me angry even though they were little things.” Cas*

*“ Things started unravelling, particularly as we became incredibly angry. One would bring the other down, which caused resentment – ‘why aren't you down like me?’ Anything could break the camel's back. We couldn't easily discuss how we should grieve – you can't control how you are grieving. Neither of us is violent but we were shocked at the violent anger we felt. We both punched plaster walls, etcetera, but fortunately took our anger out on things, not on each other. Nothing else has ever made us change like this, act in such an extreme manner.” Jenny R*

Anger sometimes leads to positive outcomes. It can energise people to confront problems such as professional failings, or to lobby for changes in hospital or government policy. Unfortunately, anger can also lead to blame and the transference of guilt or shame onto other people.

“ I transferred the blame – the guilt – onto my then husband as he was not there when it happened. He was working part-time to get money for his hobby car. He was not a real partner.”

Josie

“ My husband was very angry and blamed others, especially the ambulance, which took twenty minutes to come to the house. This wasn't an issue for me. Today he is still likely to blame others for different issues – this probably gives him a feeling of being in control. I blamed me or us directly and questioned myself: what I'd done or didn't do.” Ally

“ Paul made me promise not to blame myself – so I kept my thoughts to myself, which probably made it worse. Did I do something wrong during the pregnancy? Should I have done more during labour? Should I have demanded more of my obstetrician?” Helene

## Masking grief

Most people attempt to control their emotions some of the time, particularly in public, to stop feeling depressed or to concentrate on such tasks as organising the funeral and returning to work. However, when taken to extremes, appearing to be in control can be misleading. It risks leaving you without the support you need from family and friends. Masking grief is dangerous, for it can catch up with you sooner or later, sometimes with devastating effects.

“ If you don't cry or express your emotions everyone around you suffers; your partner, your family and friends, but worst of all your children. You die from within, you wither up, you are not the person you could have been. You have to share – you gotta listen. It's that simple. Sharing grief lessens the load. The more you share, the lighter the load.” Glenn



“ I always put on a facade so people will think you are doing well. I am still trying to ‘find myself’ and feel lonely. I spend time with my nephews and nieces but find it hard to connect with my siblings.” [Tony](#)

“ I never had any help with my grief, generally repressing it, and felt depressed for at least ten years. The tears did come years later when I attended my nephew’s funeral. In retrospect, I was really crying for my daughter.” [Nicolette](#)

“ I returned to study and work after twelve months and buried myself in work. I put on a mask every time I left the house. Home was my refuge, the only place I let myself grieve. Malcolm totally buried his grief. He was brought up not to show feelings and to remain strong and keep the family together. This had huge repercussions on his health as he nearly died of a pulmonary oedema [a life threatening condition] five weeks after Caity died.” [Linda Y](#)

“ He had been brought up in a family which didn’t talk about feelings and he didn’t want to talk. He became angry at everyone after Ines died and he didn’t know what to do with his feelings. His primary response was one of anger while mine was one of shock. He said he should go [leave the relationship] and was never home. He had a heart attack and was consequently diagnosed with depression and anxiety. This explained a lot of his behaviour.” [Helene](#)

## Managing extreme emotions

Here are some suggestions for managing extreme emotions:

- Accept that the intensity of your feelings and your ways of expressing them will differ from those of your partner and that you could experience them at different times.

- Be patient with your partner and other family members, giving them some space. Work towards mutual understanding; be prepared to apologise and make peace.
- Acknowledge that the anger and guilt is actually about your child dying. Don't take out your frustrations on those closest to you or on those with whom you feel safest. Be aware of other, seemingly unrelated issues (such as being indecisive) which are also causing tensions and conflict. Don't become side tracked by them.
- Share your feelings without recriminations and seek help if necessary. Blame can drive a wedge between you and your partner.
- Talk through these issues with a counsellor or other bereaved parents. It can be of enormous benefit as feelings of guilt and anger can cause you to withdraw from others, becoming isolated in your grief.
- Try not to repress your grief. This could lead to emotional or physical breakdown and may bring to the fore underlying issues such as depression, anxiety and mental illness.

### Less energy to support one another

Rocked by grief, each of you will have less energy to support one another, solve problems, be able to talk about what has happened or make everyday decisions. This can lead to irritation, frustration and blame.

*“ We wanted to be there for each other but couldn't even be there for ourselves. There was no strength in either ... We could do this later when each of us had a parent die but with Samuel [dying], we felt chopped off at the knees.”* [Jenny R](#)

*“ I remember lying in bed with Michelle who was sobbing with her hand pushed into her mouth to muffle the sound. I was an emotional train wreck having to run the business, be a father, a husband, deal with the death of my son. I just didn't have the time or the resources to look after someone else ... yet I was the prick.”* [Glenn](#)





**“ I turned off mentally in order to cope. I was robotic and went into survival mode in our relationship. My husband became very needy but I had nothing to give.” Ally**

Sleep can prove elusive for some people, leading to nights spent going over and over what happened, resulting in exhaustion. For others, sleep is easier and less fitful. Some people become hyperactive, pursuing mind-numbing distractions such as constantly watching TV or playing video games. This can be irritating, especially if one partner has no energy and cannot get off the couch or out of bed.

**“ I could sleep and sleep but Nathan preferred to be constantly busy so we spent little time together. We lived very separate lives.” Naomi**

**“ I had no zest. I didn't want to do anything. I walked around as if in a dream. I didn't know what was going on.” Andrew**

**“ I hid in the house and went to bed, pulling the doona over me.” Deanne**

## Managing changes in energy levels

Accept that this dislocation of energy is normal and trust that the balance will return eventually. In this way you can reduce anxiety and worry. In particular, you need to:

- Realise that to snap at someone rather than giving them time, understanding and comfort is counter-productive.
- Exercise! It helps to relax the body and generate energy. Grief can produce high levels of adrenalin. Keeping busy and active reduces feelings of helplessness, giving a greater sense of being in control. It can also help in falling asleep.
- Understand that your need for a physical outlet could be the opposite of that of your partner, who may need rest and solitude.
- Take it in turns to be the supported one. Your needs will constantly vary and it is not only women who need support.



## Craving some normality

You could be craving relief from the effort of surviving the death and coping with the unrelenting grief, the feeling that life will never be normal again. Establishing some semblance of routine, returning to work, sorting out finances or completing unfinished tasks can help you to feel you have some control.

**“ Wayne needed to be at work to have some normality, to take back control, to restore his faith that life would go on.”**

Deanne

**“ Work was my saviour and I became very anxious away from it. I felt I couldn't go home at night.”** Tony

**“ You may become a workaholic as you don't want any time to think.”** Linda Y

However, losing oneself in tasks, while temporarily helpful, can lead to bottling up feelings, thereby delaying the process of dealing with your grief. Should your partner approach things differently, for example, reflecting more on their work and practical needs than on exploring feelings, you could find yourself on 'a different page'. This can lead to misunderstanding and resentment.

Making major changes prematurely can generate other problems. For example, some parents who have returned to work quickly say they have little motivation, energy or concentration. This is especially difficult for parents who have returned to work, sometimes within days of the funeral, without receiving support or understanding.

**“ Going back to work was a nightmare. I could not function properly and I really didn't care about what I was doing. My boss was one of those guys who reckon it all goes away if you ignore it. That's bullshit. It doesn't go away. It comes back and smacks you down. I suggest you take as long as you want off work and don't worry about what others think. It is happening to you, not them ... do what you feel is best for you.”** Dion



*“ Phil had no support at work. He worked quite independently at first as his boss didn't like him taking time off.”*

Lisa

*“ Colleagues were polite and bought Red Nose Day products but weren't sensitive about the death. I didn't expect this from them however.”* Ally

*“ Keith has his own plumbing business. He had six weeks off work, three of which he was sick. Know that things can be tough financially. Costs of the funeral and time off work can take their toll.”* Linda B

You could feel very vulnerable, not knowing how to prepare for your return to work or how colleagues will react. Few of them will know what to say and some may ignore the situation entirely. A lack of empathy and support is disappointing but you need to understand that it will be difficult for them to anticipate your needs. In these circumstances it's easy to become less assertive and less tolerant of colleagues and work conversations. Don't be surprised if the experience of getting through the day leaves you exhausted and with little energy for partners and family, let alone yourself.

*“ After Sharyaka's death I went back to work within a week. My thinking was I had to keep going and stay in control of my feelings until Gayatri and Harshini were okay ... I thought a time would come for me to cry and let go but once I went back to work it was difficult to find the time. As a result I don't think I've ever had my time.”* Bas

*“ I would best describe my expression of grief initially as 'numb and silently painful'. My husband was supportive but also describes himself as numb. We had a seventeen month old daughter at home who we had to focus on. Our relationship struggled immediately and we became distant emotionally. I felt alone while my husband says he felt the same but had to return to work for some sense of normality in order to function*

*for himself, me and our daughter. I see this as a huge downward spiral in our relationship, from which we have probably never recovered fully.”* [Joanne](#)

## Managing the craving for normality

The following suggestions might help you:

- Try to understand that if your partner goes back to work quickly, or is preoccupied with keeping busy, this doesn't mean they are unfeeling or denying reality. They are dealing with it in their own way. The converse can also be true. Someone who stays at home to reflect on their grief is not necessarily wallowing in it.
- If you do return to work, try to do it gradually. Financial concerns may, of course, make this difficult to achieve.
- Take time off work or speak to your manager or counsellor about a transitional return, such as changing job tasks or working part time. Prepare colleagues to deal with the situation – let them know what you feel comfortable with. Returning to work can give you confidence that there is part of life that you can have a measure of control and competence once again.
- Read about grief and explore other resources.
- Create some time away from grief – ‘a grief-free zone.’ Do something enjoyable such as going out with friends or having long walks. This can provide respite from the situation but remember that your partner might not have the same need.
- Be careful of resuming a full social life prematurely, this can be too much to ask of yourselves.
- While you attempt to regain control over your life, don't forget to focus, from time to time, on keeping the memory of your child alive.
- Be patient with yourselves. It will take many months, possibly years, for life to get back to some sort of normality again.

The Red Nose Grief and Loss pamphlet *Returning to Work* outlines how colleagues and management can support you in returning to work.



# Your other children

Other children can be a blessing, keeping you going, helping you to get out of bed each morning and providing some distraction from your grief. Remaining emotionally available and sharing love for one another is mutually helpful. Your children can be very supportive of you and other family members, resulting in relationships becoming stronger over time.

## Challenges

Parenting is challenging, especially having to explain why a sister or brother died and, in the process, answering some very tricky questions. It is hard enough to answer them for yourself, let alone for your children. In the circumstances, you and your partner might feel resentful, pressured, even overwhelmed. You could even want to withdraw from your children for a while. Try not to do this as it could cause friction and draw criticism from others.

Your children could feel vulnerable and more at risk, finding the world a much scarier place. Therefore, they might regress, needing extra reassurance. However, be careful, because it can be easy for you to become over-protective. This could make them more fearful, undermine trust and delay the process of them coming to terms with their grief.

*“When the baby died, she got away with ‘murder’ but I was just so pleased she was there. It didn’t matter to me what she did ... the whole situation got out of balance.”* [Nerida, grandparent](#)

*“It is vitally important for parents to realise that their children’s adjustment and understanding of their sibling’s death will not be achieved in a short time. It will be built upon over years. This is a good thing and should alleviate some of the guilt initially felt by parents that they haven’t done a good job in helping their children.”* [Jenny R](#)

“ I am so protective of our other child. I wake once or twice a night to go and check she is alright. No matter what she does, I always think of the worst thing happening to her.” [Leanne](#)

“ There was a whole new culture in the house after Danielle died. Everything was different, bed routines were gone, meal-times were changed. We needed to take control and re-establish routines.” [Melissa](#)

In time there will be opportunities to share memories, look at photos, retell the story of their sibling and other activities honouring the memory. This will help to continue the bonds, especially at key times such as Christmas and anniversaries which benefit you, your children and other family members and friends.

“ Involve your kids in everything. They have some great ideas and you make them feel wanted by allowing them to have input into the funeral, cemetery visits and so on.” [Peter M](#)

“ When Hannah was three, we walked past an open grave. She said: ‘When I die will I be put in a grave?’ I had to say yes, but that she wouldn’t die until she was very, very old. I didn’t want her to think that it would be soon.” [Jenny R](#)

“ Kitty writes letters to Jesse and draws pictures of the whole family. Jesse is an angel with a big, broad smile. He looks the happiest of us all!” [Ally](#)

## Helping them

Your child’s world could now seem unsafe and insecure and so normal routines are important. Keep to the usual rules and consequences for misbehaviour. Don’t overcompensate by buying extra toys and treats. In particular, it is important to:

- Answer their questions honestly and sensitively and in a way which is appropriate to their age. This will build trust that they



can share their fears and other feelings with you. If this is too difficult for you, at this time of grief, maybe a close relative or friend can help. As time passes, they are likely to enquire further as an integral part of growing up.

- Acknowledge difficulties with parenting. Seek support and understand that this need not be a long-term problem.
- Explain clearly to your children that your sadness, emotional distance and occasionally 'losing it' is not their fault. Be aware that your own relationship concerns can affect them.

These and other issues, together with helpful responses from parents, are discussed in detail in the Red Nose Grief and Loss booklet: *What about the other kids?*

# Your parents

Grandparents are in a unique situation, for they feel the death of their grandchild intensely. For them it can be ‘a double grief’ – grief for you, their child, and grief for their grandchild. They, too, have looked forward so much to this new relationship and now it has been taken from them. Their own relationships could be affected in similar ways to yours and they, like you, can feel very alone in their grief. Being unable to fix it, like they could when you were small, can be very frustrating. It is easy for them to lose confidence in themselves, feeling that whatever they do or say isn’t enough or is inappropriate. Some grandparents describe this as ‘constantly walking on eggshells’, feeling that whatever they did wasn’t enough. They, too, could become more fearful, over-protective or even permissive with your other children.

“It took me a long time to acknowledge my husband’s grief, let alone the grief of others in the family such as the grandparents.” [Paula](#)

“My father is not the same since Catharine died and this is another loss for me.” [Erica](#)

“I withdrew from my parents. Their pain was too much. My mother lost her only granddaughter and was in such pain but could see the great pain in me as well.” [Jane](#)

“My daughter needed me there but hardly spoke to me. I just wanted to hold her and tell her I loved her but I wasn’t allowed.” [Marilyn, grandparent](#)

“Bereaved people become like fifteen year olds. I know not to depend on them. They have nothing to give so I needed to meet my own needs and seek my own supports. Support was one way, not reciprocal.” [Annette, grandparent](#)





**“ It was a loss of hopes and dreams and a loss of innocence and trust in the world. Love for a subsequent child doesn't come naturally. You have a fear of further loss. You become over-protective and hate the responsibility.”** [Nerida, grandparent](#)

Your parents will probably have experienced earlier deaths, so the death of your child can bring up issues with which they have never dealt or have not thought about for a long time. In these circumstances you might receive less support and have to accept their diminished capacity to help you. Indeed, they could need your support. While this might be very difficult, sharing the grief can have benefits.

**“ We became aware of the coping mechanisms of my parents and realised how the death impacted on them. The relationship didn't change much. Both families were very supportive, although sometimes too close and at others not close enough. They did the best they could for us. They gave us space to grieve.”** [Jenny R](#)

**“ My mother's parents died when she was a teenager. It helped us both to talk about it. Know that your child's death will bring up issues for others and help them to talk.”** [Linda B](#)

## Helping them

While it is very important to understand your parents' situation, you will need to be patient with them, given that you are barely able to function yourself. Sometimes, when one's grief feels so overwhelming, there is no room left to support others. Red Nose Grief and Loss offers bereavement support to grieving grandparents. Reading more about grief can help you to understand your parents' responses as well as your own. The Red Nose Grief and Loss booklet *Grandparent to Grandparent* is a valuable resource for both you and your parents. Here are some of its key suggestions:

- It helps if grandparents get some support, such as joining a group, for example, talking to other bereaved grandparents, and reading about the grief of parents, children and grandparents.
- Grandparents often will feel helpless and that they cannot 'fix things', but it is important for them to listen, not give advice or expect to fully understand. Encourage grandparents to help in a practical way, for example shopping, cooking meals and taking care of the other children; it will help both of you.
- Suggest to grandparents that acknowledging the death, particularly on special days such as anniversaries, and mentioning the child's name, is very important. Having your child forgotten would be a further loss for you.



# Other family members and friends

It is inevitable that your relationships with other family members will be tested. People will respond in different ways and may not understand how to best help you or to help themselves, especially if the death is the first the extended family has had to face. This can result in one or more of the reactions described below.

## Lack of understanding

Relationships can become strained when others fail to acknowledge the magnitude and length of your grief or are critical of your ways of dealing with it. Your child might not seem real to them, especially if they never had the opportunity to become acquainted with him or her. People can say insensitive and inappropriate things, not know how to talk to you, or in some cases, avoid the issue all together. It is easy to mistake this for not caring.

“*Friends never saw the baby, so it was easy for them to walk away; it was too hard for them and they had no concept of the loss. It was very hurtful.*” Tony

“*My in-laws had no idea of our grief, couldn't help us and felt quite sorry for themselves. Our own siblings were not helpful and we weren't able to talk to them about our grief either.*” Lisa

## People avoiding you

Unable to go beyond the first outpourings of sympathy, people could feel uncomfortable and not know how to support you. They can become easily impatient when hearing you talk about your child or the death once again. They might say nothing, afraid of making things worse or avoid you altogether, as if the death is somehow contagious.

Others who are struggling in their own relationship might avoid you because they somehow fear that your stress will also affect them.

Perhaps you are the only one in your circle who has had a child die which is every parent's worst nightmare. The death can be especially difficult for friends or relatives who are pregnant at the time, and can cause them to pull back from you.

“*My friends didn't say anything about Jesse; they were initially shocked and terrified to talk to us. It made me very angry that they 'wide berthed me'. One close friend was initially great but then distanced herself.*” Ally

“*Two friends who were pregnant at the same time aren't as close now. I cannot see their children who were born after Romi. I feel uncomfortable with them; the friendships are now strained.*” Jo

“*You can lose friends, particularly pregnant friends.*” Ruth

“*People are well intentioned but cannot or won't always be helpful. Accept when good support is offered – some people will be exceptional and others will disappoint. Your experience can frighten people away; they may not be able to cope with your losses.*” Lisa

## Unreal expectations

These can arise when your family and friends expect too much of you, failing to realise that you can't just 'snap out of it' and get back to normal. This is difficult when you just want to hibernate. Take your time, even when others don't understand. While it could cause you to lose some friends, your relationship with others might grow as a result.

“*Don't feel obliged to attend social functions. Even though friends say they need to see you, to see that you are okay, to*



*hug you, your needs do come first. You need to tell them that you are not ready to socialise, that you need time to just be with family, to 'hibernate' and process what has happened."*

Linda B

“*Relationships with friends broke down. I used to be a 'fixer', a helper to others. I don't want 'high maintenance' friends any more. It seems okay to let some friends go. I'm told I am more direct now. It's hard to put yourself first now but accept that you will have to do that. You may feel guilty but this is a time for self-preservation. It is sink or swim. It's only now, eight years on, that all my coping skills are returning."* Leanne

“*Perhaps some friends wouldn't have lasted anyway and maybe we have outgrown them. Somehow a baby's death brings this issue to the fore."* George

“*Friendships naturally wax and wane over time. But you will come to realise the true extent of friends' and acquaintances' empathy and support."* Jenny R

“*Most of our friends have come back into our lives but I am not as close to them or expect as much from them now. I now understand why our friends weren't there for us and forgive them, although there is still hurt."* Lisa

## Different customs and religious beliefs

These could create difficulties, for example, when family members insist on a particular religious service against your wishes or differ as to the etiquette of people paying their condolences. It might be helpful to sit down with your partner and decide what you both really want at this time. As a result you could decide on a service without other family members, outside expected traditions and behaviours, or follow the traditions of one family rather than the other. Either course of action can be costly in terms of family harmony.

*“ We didn’t have a traditional religious service. My mother-in-law wouldn’t come to the funeral as my daughter was only blessed by the priest, not christened. To her it meant she wouldn’t go to heaven, wasn’t a Christian, wasn’t a person in God’s eyes. That was too hard to forgive at the time ... my father-in-law bucked tradition and did come. I respected him for that.”* Nicolette

*“ I was never close to my parents and sisters and aren’t now. My family are Scientologists and believe that you bring bad things to yourself. So they thought I was responsible for my (earlier) brain tumour as well as Jesse’s death and that my husband was the bad thing in my life.”* Ally

Family and friends might not understand the importance of special days, such as the anniversaries of the birth and death of your child, which you feel need to be acknowledged. Birthdays, Christmas and other events linked with the happiness of children will be particularly sad times. For people close to you to ignore these important days can be particularly hurtful.

*“ Some people in the family forgot that it happened and needed to be reminded that it had happened. I felt very hurt and alone.”* Tony

## Distance

Geographical separation can make it difficult for others to support you and it is sometimes easier for them to avoid the issue altogether.

*“ My mother didn’t come over from Adelaide to support me which was very hard. I now know why and that she regrets this.”* Fiona

*“ My brother lived in another state and didn’t even send a card. He has never once talked to me about my baby, even though he too had a child die some years later. He just passed on a message via my mother for me to take care of myself.”*  
Nicolette



## Managing these relationships

Try to surround yourself with friends and family members who are able to understand your grief and needs. You could make new friends who 'just get it', especially those you meet in support groups. Having people who give you space when you need it can be important and so too is having those with whom you can socialise or play sport, go for a walk or a coffee – with whom you can have a 'grief-free zone'.

By reading about grief, you might be able to tell those in your circle about what would actually benefit you. Often, others just don't have a clue and need to be told! Some want to be told and will be open to suggestions - helping them to help you.

It is vital that you understand that relationships which are already strong will, in all likelihood, stay that way. Weaker ones can also strengthen if there is mutual acknowledgement and sharing of the grief. Over time, you could find more energy to invest in your family. Some people begin to spend more time with their children and other family members than they ever did.

*“ My dad is very much an old fashioned guy who would prefer to forget these things, just leave it, but when it came to making a special box to store some of her things, it was dad who did it.” Adam*

*“ I am now closer to my sister than ever before and also closer to my parents. They were very helpful and would mention the baby's name.” Helene*

*“ We spend much more time as a couple than with friends now. Leanne's family is close and they have become my family too. I am less close to my family as they said some very insensitive things.” George*

*“ We lost some friends but there were others who demonstrated such kindness and support. Some came from surprising places.” Helene*

“Some friendships have been strengthened – these friends understand me and have supported me. I showed them my vulnerability. They have seen me at my worst, so I feel comfortable with them.” Jo

“Real friends listen without offering any solution. They don't try to 'fix it' for you” Anthony

“Some friends do 'get it' and are helpful.” Tony and Fiona

“My father felt the loss of Jessie keenly and got a tattoo in memory of her. This was so helpful to us.” Prue

“My mother-in-law made a quilt, which was very helpful to us. She also attended the grandparents' group, which helped her and put less pressure on our relationship. She is still fantastic and a great part of our lives.” Ally

Understanding and forgiving people for insensitivity or lack of support is difficult. This is complicated if you feel a heightened sense of responsibility for causing pain to others, or are saddened by lost or changed relationships. In these circumstances, having fewer expectations of others and being able to forgive are helpful, resulting in less hurt, loss, anger and disappointment.

“Michael was able to put other people's needs ahead of his and be generous and forgiving. He comes from a loving family and is a loving son, so had particular expectations of himself. In addition to looking after me, he was also very protective of his parents and felt he had brought grief onto them. He didn't want to add to their grief. I wasn't as forgiving of others as he was and couldn't put others' needs ahead of us.” Jessica

“Accept other people's deficits ... I too would not have known what to say.” Kerri





**“ Accepting that some friends won't be able to support you, won't be able to cope with your grief, meant we didn't lose friends.”** [Jenny O'N](#)

Finally, give yourself time to adjust to the death and accept that this will not be a quick or easy process. Don't push yourself to normalise your life quickly. Be prepared to ask your friends to be patient with you until you are ready to socialise again.

**“ Many friends asked what they could do and continued to include us in social engagements. In hindsight we probably added to our stress by trying to keep up with our social calendar rather than declining invitations. It meant that we would dine with friends and then cry all the way home. It is better to tell your friends – ‘we will come to being social again but leave us for now.’”** [Jenny R](#)

Encourage family and friends to read the Red Nose Grief and Loss booklet *To Family and Friends: You Can Make a Difference*. This has a more in-depth discussion of these issues, along with helpful strategies. Counsellors and trained parent supporters can also attend a meeting (called a Network Meeting) of those in your network who want to know more about grief and what can be helpful.

# Part 2: Moving forward

## Embracing change

The death of your child changes your life dramatically, challenging you individually and in your various relationships. Cherished assumptions and fundamental values can be questioned and nothing will seem as it was before.

The process of coming to terms with your grief and moving forward is very confronting, especially if you and your partner initially reacted in radically different ways. However, it can also bring about healing, renew and invigorate relationships and open up fresh possibilities for personal growth.

A journey of many small steps, rather than a great leap forward, it requires commitment, an enhanced appreciation of the nature and implications of grief and a reappraisal of priorities and responsibilities. Finding the courage to take this journey, embracing the changes that it brings and seeking help along the way, can transform your life.

The following sections look at different ways in which people grieve, as well as some of the challenges that you could face as you move forward. They also suggest various ways in which you can nurture yourself and your relationships.



# Do men and women grieve differently?

Many assumptions remain in our society about the ways in which men and women grieve, despite a shift away from traditional roles and expectations. Broadly speaking, these assumptions relate both to different ways of responding emotionally and to different social roles – men as providers and protectors, women as carers and nurturers. For example, a man expressing emotions in public often draws the disapproval of others, while a woman who prefers to grieve alone, or is unable to express her grief openly, can be seen as hard, cold or in denial.

Your way of grieving will not necessarily be determined by gender alone. You and your partner most likely started the grief journey at a different place, have different issues to deal with and different resources to draw upon as well as your own personalities. Cultural and religious backgrounds, individual experiences of death and loss, as well as the degree of attachment that each of you had with your child, can all vary and play a part in how you grieve. The ways in which we deal with bereavement and express grief are fundamentally individual. Over time you will probably change in the way you express and deal with your grief.

*“Each person will grieve differently because of differences in culture, values and returning to work or not.”* [Leanne](#)

*“Grief can vary so much from person to person that it can be hard to discern what it is for somebody else.”* [Paula](#)

*“We still share the grief a hundred per cent but we are a hundred miles apart in how we see things. The triggers which set us off are still the same but he goes to the grave by himself.”*  
[Ally](#)

**“ Differences are not just defined by gender. There will always be individual differences.”** [Jessica](#)

Nevertheless, there are certain typical ways in which people grieve and understanding more about them can further your appreciation of one another's needs. It is important to stress that one way is not better than the other.

### **Intuitive grieving**

People who grieve intuitively experience and adapt to grief on an affective or feeling level, finding it easier to express and display their emotions, often by crying or shouting. Consumed by the death, they need company and emotional and physical support. Initially feeling self-focussed and powerless, they can nevertheless be helped in ways which allow them to vent their emotions.

Preoccupied with thoughts of their child, intuitive grievers initially lack the ability to control emotions or to switch off the thoughts that go around and around their head – the ‘what ifs’, the ‘if onlys’. They usually spend more time grieving, do so more intensely than their partner and can worry that their partner is not grieving enough or doesn't care.

Even though not all women grieve in the same way, they are more likely to do so in these intuitive, verbal and emotionally expressive ways. Women generally read more about grief and ‘self-help’ strategies, are more likely to seek out counselling and support groups, and talk more about their loss. Women more often share their grief with each other.

While men also have this need and a few do find support groups helpful, there are generally fewer opportunities for them to share grief and little social encouragement or expectation for them to seek help. Instead, they are more likely to undertake a project in memory of their child or share an activity with other bereaved dads such as fishing, cycling or building a memorial (see ‘Instrumental grieving’ below).



“ I needed to talk to other people other than Michael and hear about their experiences. Normalising my experiences was important to me. He didn't have the same need.” [Jessica](#)

“ I was much more expressive than Kurt. I felt broken; my whole life had just fallen apart. I got help straight away and attended groups and although it wasn't his cup of tea, he supported me in this.” [Kerri](#)

“ You need to talk to others to feel less lonely.” [Helene](#)

“ I wanted to express myself verbally and he didn't ... he is proud of the fact that he never cried. I cried a lot and went to as many support groups as I could as I felt very much alone ... he still keeps his feelings to himself as this was the way he was brought up.” [Ruth](#)

“ Recognise that men and women grieve very differently. For women there are more reminders of the pregnancy and the loss as we carried the babies.” [Jo](#)

In the past, this way of grieving was often seen as superior. People reluctant to talk about their feelings were seen as being in denial or unwilling to deal with their grief. Today there are many more resources available to help you understand that there are different, but equally valid, ways of experiencing, expressing and adapting to grief. It is possible that you or your partner could find yourself grieving intuitively at first and then shifting the pattern over time.

### Instrumental grieving

This approach focusses more on doing rather than expressing, on planning and managing activities in order to restructure the shattered world. Becoming connected to the future rather than the past, and being more aligned with action and mastery of one's self and one's environment, provides an avenue for dealing with the enormity of grief. Men more typically grieve in this way, rationalising their loss

in terms of the wider implications for the family. However, this also applies to some women and is likely to become more common with changing social and work roles.

People who grieve in this way do so more privately than their partners, setting aside or compartmentalising their grief, only releasing their grief or acknowledging it at certain times, such as when visiting the grave, going on long drives or on anniversaries. However, putting grief on the backburner doesn't make it go away and it will need to be acknowledged and expressed at some stage. The challenge is to find ways of doing this which suit your way of grieving, not what is expected of you.

Many instrumental grievers find the following activities helpful in managing or working through their grief: working on projects such as lobbying to change hospital policy, performing rituals, making a sculpture, writing a book or journal, organising a cricket or footy match in honour of their child, raising money by organising events.

Men generally have fewer opportunities to express their emotions cathartically (that is, in a way that is helpful for them), because they respond according to social expectations or perceptions about their partner's needs coming first. Stoicism and cynicism are common responses, given the poorer social support and opportunities for social intimacy in many male networks. Men sometimes feel that their partner's way of grieving threatens their own way of dealing with feelings and become impatient for them to return to a less emotional state. Such instrumental grievers can feel overwhelmed by their partner's grief and helpless and powerless to fix it.

**“ Women have the advantage in that they can approach one another. But for men it is different. I felt that if my wife and I both grieve, if we both bawl our eyes out, who is going to pay the bills? My wife needs to grieve and I have to get back to work – I cannot take time out to cry for a week or two weeks. It's that male thing of being the provider.” Glenn**

**“ Even though the father isn't bawling constantly, it doesn't mean he isn't grieving. His grief is conveyed more physically, less emotionally.” Jo**



“ Because I am the man, I think I have to be the strong one.”

Anthony

“ I packed my grief up. It wasn't in the bottom drawer but it was buried ... it was always close to the surface, but it was kept out of sight. I wanted to make it as easy as possible for everyone else ... I felt it was my responsibility as a father and a husband.” Mark

“ As a human being, I have a self-preservation mode that allows me to close up shop emotionally and intellectually in the midst of a crisis. My problem as a man is that I don't reopen the shop and quickly find myself in a place of loneliness, resentment and being overwhelmed, confused, frustrated, anxious and frightened. Because of my disconnection with the rest of the world, all these feelings came out sideways and I began to hurt the people I loved and pushed them away. Then I began to think myself into places that I couldn't think myself out of.” Bill

“ Men aren't intimate with each other when they are growing up. A lot of their emotion is conveyed in physicality, so to get a man to talk about it ... the immediate reaction is to choke it out. It's like trying to wring something out of a dry sponge.”

Anthony

“ Clinton tried to see a counsellor but couldn't open up. He still cannot talk about the baby years later.” Jane

“ It's not that men don't grieve as much as women, it's just that they don't want to appear upset or weak. I don't think men grieve as openly as women. Perhaps they play things around in their head a bit more but just because they don't show it visibly, it doesn't mean that they are not as upset. I think that many men think things through and keep things to themselves

*but I think men need some sort of release ... most men get to a stage that they need to let it go. This is what happened to me. It built up and I just let go.” Andrew*

*“ I think it’s important to understand that men are different. The way they grieve is different. The way they think is different. Men generally behave in a certain way because they have some purpose in mind. Sitting down and crying might not always be the best way for a man to deal with the death of a child. He might prefer to get things done but that doesn’t mean he is in denial mode.” Bas*

## Other ways of grieving

Sometimes grieving struggles to find an outlet that is in harmony with the griever’s nature. For example, some men are naturally inclined to express themselves emotionally but feel constrained by conventional expectations about male behaviour. With support and understanding, they can begin to express their feelings in other ways.

*“ I was the more emotional one and can cry at anything sad on TV. My husband used to be the toughest man on the planet but is now more emotional. ‘Daddy cries now,’ say the kids. He still has anger and this can be to cover up being more emotional.” Ally*

*“ Thankfully I am not the typical male. It wouldn’t have been right for me to shut up and just get on with it. Otherwise I would have ended up in the ‘funny farm’. Going to a support group together allowed us to talk and understand each other’s way of grieving.” George*

In some instances men grieve intuitively, at the beginning, but then change as work and family responsibilities kick in. On the other hand, some women who would like to express their feelings openly might repress them in order to protect their loved ones or to fit in with family expectations. This is understandable especially when others urge them to move on and get over it.





*“ I never sought help, read about grief or talked to family and friends about my babies. Stoicism rules in my family. I pushed my grief aside and focussed on getting back into life and work and bringing up my (now) only child. My marriage broke up and I suffered some form of depression for over a decade. Almost twenty years after she died I began my 'grief work', read much on grief and began to understand what we'd experienced and why. I finally visited the grave for the first time.” Nicolette*

It is important to accept that people will grieve differently, some intuitively and some instrumentally. These two patterns can be seen as end points on a continuum but many people combine elements of both approaches. Others change the way they grieve over time.

There is no right or wrong way to grieve; one way is not superior to the other. It is an individual process and people can and do change. Sensitivity to your partner's needs is crucial.

# Individual differences challenge relationships

The distinctive ways in which people express grief can be profoundly influenced by different experiences and beliefs. Given the circumstances of your child's death, these differences are likely to create unique challenges for you and your partner.

## Family background

Different family, cultural and religious backgrounds can all influence the ways in which you confront personal challenges and deal with relationship issues. Each culture defines relationships in unique ways and has norms governing the expression of grief. Common backgrounds and beliefs can enhance mutual understanding but radical differences could alienate, leaving one shocked by the other person's grieving and mourning customs.

Religious and spiritual issues can arise and create tension between family members. You could come up against different ways of responding, for example, to medical decisions or to religious rituals around death. Some people become angry at God and lose faith; for others, belief can be awakened. In order to avoid serious conflict, sensitivity and tolerance are essential.

## The state of your relationship

While most relationships survive the death of a child, not all do. A well-established and supportive one, marked by respect and intimacy, provides a strong base for moving forward. It certainly can help you to cope more effectively.

*“ We gave each other time out to grieve. I felt bonded to Tim due to Romi's death. We experienced it together so I felt closer to him – we did it together. If the relationship could cope with the death of a child, it could survive almost anything. This still gives me strength today.” Jo*



“ Keith was very supportive and I discovered a lot about him at this time. Neither of us had any tragedies in our lives but we realised the importance of good communication and of supporting each other. We became closer and bonded more. We learned to not sweat the small stuff – don’t focus on the mundane, prioritise what you need to do.” [Linda B](#)

If the death occurred during the early stages of your relationship or before a strong bond has developed, your resilience can be sorely tested, especially if this is the first big loss for either of you. Unacknowledged problems relating to control, chronic anxiety, anger and restlessness are likely to be compounded, potentially endangering the relationship.

“ I feel that the only thing that keeps us together is a dead baby. It isn’t enough.” [Anon](#)

“ We had little in common and couldn’t talk together or help each other. Today we both agree that we just had no energy to work on our marriage once we got into trouble with that. We both felt emotionally dead inside. Both he and I felt nothing and had no energy for each other or anyone else for a long time. I think grief makes you incredibly self-centred. However, after a necessary separation, we are now back together again.” [Jane](#)

“ I needed to tell him that my world had stopped and that he was contributing to me not coping by not talking to me about the death. I felt I was on a tightrope and he was treading on my fingers.” [Janelle](#)

“ In hindsight we were bound to break up anyway. The death made me realise how different we were – that we had very different values, different ideas about what we wanted in life. It helped me to move on, create new relationships and I am better off for it. I don’t think my husband has ever grieved our daughter’s death.” [Nicolette](#)

It requires more than the shared experience of losing a baby or child to keep a relationship together, irrespective of its existing quality. Your capacity to communicate with one another clearly, honestly and with sensitivity can be sorely tested. Some couples find that too much talk can be intimidating, especially if one partner appears to be disinterested or unsupportive. In other cases, people are afraid of burdening their partner and don't talk enough.

**“ It was easy not to talk about our grief earlier on. I didn't want to break down. Communication apart from this was good but we couldn't talk about the 'elephant in the room' until much later.”** Lisa

## Differences in attachment

People sometimes differ as to how attached they are to their child at the time of birth, especially if he or she died well before the due date. Some parents, especially mothers, bond early, even from the first moment of realising they are pregnant or seeing the first ultrasound. Others do so later when the pregnancy is well developed, at birth or even later.

It can be hard to grieve when your baby is very premature and not yet a reality to you, your partner or your community. Different responses, one feeling the loss more intensely than the other, can generate resentment. You could feel that your grief is stronger and more long-lasting. One partner might be grieving for their baby while the other could be grieving for the lost future they envisaged as a parent.

Should the mother's life be at risk during the birth, her partner might have had stronger feelings for her welfare than for the baby, and need help to cope with the traumatic experience of nearly losing their partner as well. It can be hard for each person to understand why they are grieving so differently.

**“ Often there are other issues in a relationship which can be magnified after the death of a child. I discovered (after counselling) that my husband had never seen himself as a father. Knowing this made his (unsupportive) behaviour more**



*understandable and knowing how he thought made our relationship easier.”* Ruth

*“ My first baby was born at twenty weeks’ gestation. My husband went back to work and carried on as if nothing serious had happened. I felt pressure to return to work and resumed three weeks later. The baby was never seen or officially named and a service was not held. Not naming the baby made it difficult to grieve for him in any meaningful way. For my husband, it was more a loss of a pregnancy than a loss of a baby.”* Nicolette

## Previous experience of death and loss

Our parents are our first teachers and how they have taught us to deal with death and loss will impact on us now. Often unresolved losses in our past, such as other pregnancy losses or the death of a parent or friend, are brought to the fore when a child dies, making our current grieving even more intense.

The experience can be harder if you and your partner have never dealt with a major death before. On the other hand, previous experiences could have given you knowledge and emotional resources to use in dealing with your child’s death. One of you might cope relatively well and the other need lots of support.

*“ My father’s death compounded my grief and I shelved my grief again as I had to help my mother cope. She couldn’t always ‘hear’ me but gave practical support for my other children.”* Lisa

*“ When Madeleine died, the experiences of loss I’d encountered and the two earlier miscarriages were magnified. I thought it was important for me to maintain other elements of my life because so much of my personal life was falling apart.”*  
Greg

# Sex and intimacy

## The sexual side of our relationship has changed

People who are grieving frequently experience a change in sexual feelings and responsiveness which can last for weeks, months and even years. For some, sexual feelings disappear altogether, while for others they intensify. Intimacy offers some couples much-needed comfort while the sexual needs of others are out of sync or mismatched. Rest assured, although there can be a period of instability, distress and communication problems, most relationships do recover the same level of intimacy that they had before the death.

*“ Resuming intimacy was part of George’s need but for me it took a while to be emotionally ready. I never worried about it but I was aware of my own emotional disconnection for a while.”* [Leanne](#)

## The risk of misreading your partner’s needs

Many factors work together to generate misunderstanding. For example, fluctuations in a woman’s hormone levels often mean that while she craves affection, tenderness and reassurance, there is little desire for sexual intercourse. Should the man be emotionally withdrawn and seem only interested in intercourse, withholding and feelings of rejection sometimes come into play.

Given the circumstances of your child’s death, making love could feel wrong and for your partner to want to do so might seem disrespectful of your need to grieve. On the other hand, should you be the one to want more contact, resistance to sexual intimacy can equate with a lack of concern for your feelings or even feel like rejection of you as a person.

One or both of you could feel too exhausted physically and emotionally to make love. However, time in bed together can be one of holding, sharing, mutual reassurance and spiritual reflection. Sex



can be a comfort and reassuring, an intense way to ease pain of any sort, to forget about it for a little while. It can also function as an affirmation of life.

“*The more ‘needy’ he became, the more I moved away. This was not a conscious decision. I needed space but he needed to be loved more, needed sex early on. I had no capacity to show it so it was hard for me to resume intimacy. This took a few weeks but my heart wasn’t in it; it took a year for me to be in the right space for sex.*” Ally

“*I wanted intimacy all the time – it wasn’t for the sex but for the closeness. For me, sex means intimacy. If I could have crawled inside him I would have.*” Deanne

“*As soon as I had Eliza I knew I wanted another baby. I wasn’t interested in having sex; I just wanted a baby. However, I was scared of another pregnancy and losing another baby with an abnormality. I would always find excuses – ‘I’m too tired to have sex’. Kurt was very patient and understanding.*” Kerri

“*Wayne didn’t want sex for a long time. ‘I am just too sad,’ he said. Sex and pregnancy aren’t linked for us as we went through IVF.*” Deanne

“*I steered away from intimacy with Jo. I think for a good twelve months, I didn’t want to know about our sex life. I didn’t want to go there. I didn’t want to know about sex. Yet I still craved it. I didn’t want to have sex with Jo because I couldn’t deal with what had happened to us. I didn’t want to bring it all up. I didn’t want to think about the emotions or about having more children.*” Mark

## Seeking comfort, affection and/or sex outside the relationship

Sometimes a grieving parent, unable to cope with the intensity of their partner's grief, emotional withdrawal or lack of interest in sex, seeks solace in another person. The trauma of the death can make a person behave in an uncharacteristic way. What would normally be seen as an act of desperation, denial or a flight from responsibility, can symbolise a yearning for control and normality connected with a need to heal.

*“ We grieved well together initially but the subsequent baby brought up so much fear. My husband could not cope with my incredible anxiety and could not meet my needs. He was also angry that no one acknowledged his grief. He withdrew and just drifted away from me and I felt very lonely. He met someone else who could listen to him and he left the marriage.”*

Eva

*“ Loneliness may mean being drawn to someone else who will listen.”* Tony and Jane

*“ I know many other blokes who, when their grief has kicked in, have wandered from their wives because they haven't been able to deal with getting intimate again. They have been too scared. They have been afraid of what they might have to confront. Instead of facing their problems, they have tried to escape. There was a time when, if the opportunity had come up, I might have done that too because I was finding it really hard to go home every day and face what we had lost.”* Mark

While another relationship could cause considerable distress and a sense of betrayal, it need not necessarily become a long-term problem. Understanding and talking honestly, possibly forgiveness (hard as that would be), are essential for a relationship to survive. Couple counselling can also be invaluable.





## Resuming your sexual relationship

This can be a way of feeling loved and supported, symbolising a return to some form of normality, albeit a different one. The combination of physical and emotional intimacy, shedding tears and sharing memories of your child makes for a very intense personal experience, at least for a time. Grief, during or immediately after intercourse, could be a sign that your sexuality has achieved a down-to-the-core emotional connection that is only found in the strongest of relationships.

**“ Within hours of Molly Rose dying, Ian and I knew that we had to have another child to love and watch grow. We couldn't live in the darkness that surrounded us. We had to hold on to some form of hope. Although we remained bound by our sorrow and cuddled together in our pain, I found it hard to make love. How could I enjoy sex when we had been making love the same night that Molly Rose died? Did she die alone in her bed whilst we happily enjoyed each other? It became a slow road of understanding, finding each other - of touching and learning to give one's self again. If we had not wanted another baby so desperately, maybe physically our love might have been scalded. We worked together, and are moving forward together. I thank my husband for his love and patience.”** *Jill, in the Red Nose Grief and Loss booklet [Always Your Child](#)*

Each of you must work hard at identifying your own feelings and the meaning that you give to sexuality. Sharing these perspectives sensitively and being open to change can help to make the grief more bearable and draw you closer together. Even if there is a break in sexual intercourse, don't stop hugging, holding and touching. In fact, you could find yourselves doing this more often, deriving comfort, increased meaning, support and understanding from it. A relationship without intercourse can still be rewarding and you are less likely to feel isolated and afraid of the relationship breaking down if you still maintain some physical 'connection'. It is important to understand that resuming sexual intimacy can take time. It may require patience and understanding and need not become a major issue.

“ Intimacy was affected for only six to eight weeks. At first I found it difficult but I made a conscious decision to not let it affect our relationship and made a point of putting thoughts of Romi aside when we made love. I found touch very nurturing; I needed nurturing and intimacy was good for me.” Jo

“ After Maya’s death, physical intimacy was an expression of grief and not about having another baby. This made it easier for us.” Jessica



## Another child

Often a parent is desperate to have another child, to fill the emptiness and to give life meaning once again. Needing hope and not wanting to end one's childbearing on a negative note is very understandable. Without another child one's family might not feel complete, a view possibly shared between partners.

*“ There was no end to grief without another child.” Jenny O’N*

*“ Although we could never replace Samuel, we had never wanted Hannah to be an only child so felt we had to get pregnant very quickly. There was little intimacy, however, as sex was for the sole purpose of having another child. It was simply a means to an end.” Jenny R*

You can be so overwhelmed by grief, or fear another loss, that you or your partner might believe it is far too soon. Alternatively, your partner may support you having another child earlier than they would like as a way of helping you heal and move forward. Either way, forcing the issue can be dangerous but accepting that another child is really important for your partner will help your relationship survive and grow.

*“ I became obsessed with having another child. Philip was not on the same page and when I pleaded to have sex in order to get pregnant, he objected and said ‘I have had enough. This isn’t the right reason for having sex.’ Sex did become instrumental for us and we did go on to have other children. Today sex is how it should be.” Lisa*

*“ If it was for me I wouldn’t have tried for another baby. I had been happy with my family; for me it wasn’t incomplete. However, it became clear to me that only by having another baby would Jenny have resolution of her grief, for her to feel her family was complete. Otherwise we wouldn’t move on in*

*our lives. Also I had to accept that medical advice can only help so far, that there was always the chance of it happening again."*

Robert O'N

“ Keith was ultra patient with me as he wanted a subsequent child quicker than I did. He knew I would be ready eventually and didn't force it. We have regained the intimacy we had before but it did take six to eight months. His affections were of great comfort to me and we regained intimacy without much stress.”

Linda B

“ Another baby does help with the healing and growing as a person.” Lisa

“ We were drifting in different directions. I wanted to focus on family and have another child and he went the opposite way and wanted to have fun again and go back to a simple existence, whereas I felt there was no going back. This created arguments and friction.” Amy

“ I wanted other children before Sam died and I'm sure Sam would want me to fulfill my dreams after his death, as I would if he were alive.” Wendy

“ It almost became my mission to succeed in having a child in order to feel fulfilled. I suffered three miscarriages after Lexie's death and then had another daughter after a very high risk pregnancy.” Joanne

“ Despite us both wanting to be pregnant again, he hated making love on the fertile days; it made him have performance anxiety. There was no spontaneity ... we each wanted the other to make the first move. I'm surprised we did get pregnant again!”

Naomi



“ After so many pregnancies I could not emotionally go through another one especially with so little support and so little acknowledgement of what we'd lost on the part of my husband. I decided I needed to focus on our daughter. My relationship with my husband was just too fragile.” Nicolette

See Red Nose Grief and Loss booklet: *Another baby? The decision is Yours*. The following quotes come from this booklet.

“ We learned that a great number of bereaved parents decide on having another baby. I think this gave us some encouragement also.”

“ We could never replace Alyce but we needed another baby to cuddle. Renee was born a year later. She brought us back to life. It was the best decision we ever made for ourselves and our older daughter.”

# Problematic coping mechanisms

Grief sometimes leads to overuse of alcohol and other drugs, especially if there has been dependence on them in the past. Along with other compulsive behaviour, such as smoking, gambling, over-eating, over-working or endlessly watching TV, this can be a way of avoiding dealing with overwhelming feelings and difficult issues.

While drugs, like alcohol, sometimes provide short-term relief such as falling asleep, they are more likely to cause wakefulness and worsen fatigue, possibly causing you to release anger and frustration on those closest to you. Antidepressants, although sometimes helpful in the short term, can cause similar problems, temporarily masking grief, but in reality prolonging it in the long term.

When these forms of behaviour are used as ways of coping, conflicts can arise, with the risks of disrupting family life or threatening financial security. When self-medicating, it's easy to deceive yourself and your partner about their impact.

“*I'm very grateful to the drugs and the booze as it was the only way that prevented me killing myself or other people. It was the only thing that gave me any sort of relief from the internal grief that I felt. The only problem was that the grief was still there when I woke up and what ended up happening was that I took a drug, then the drug took a drug, then it was a long time before I could get back. Some never do.*” [Bill](#)

“*My husband drinks most nights and it is a coping mechanism. Alcohol has cost us a lot. I avoided alcohol on the first anniversary as alcohol isn't my relaxer – it is my 'number' (what numbs the pain) and if I drink I can get angry and yell at the kids.*” [Fiona](#)

“*My husband drank a lot and couldn't sleep. Alcohol blotted out the world.*” [Ally](#)



It is important not to be judgemental. Your partner has not necessarily chosen this behaviour. Habits and addictions, as ways of coping, are difficult to change when under stress. It is better to try to reduce tension by negotiating tentative agreements that each can change if necessary. For example, one of you could agree to cut down drinking if the other watches less TV or stays at home more. Try to understand what is going on between you and your partner. You may need to think not only about the grief but also issues which can compound it, such as family loyalties, power battles and money problems. These are all issues which can benefit from counselling.

# Nurturing your relationships and helping yourself

## Facing adversity

A child's death sometimes greatly strengthens relationships over time. You can learn and change, finding resources in yourself that have the potential to transform you, your relationship with each other and others in your network.

Facing adversity together, being forced to grow, developing a stronger mutual understanding, learning more about each other and finding solace and comfort in each other, can all lead to intimacy that is long lasting.

Many parents say that they developed qualities that strengthened all their relationships in the long run, such as tolerance of difference, patience, humility and generosity. They learned to become more forgiving of themselves and others, to be less controlling, to value their other children more, to be less materialistic and more spiritual.

*“Over the last few years we have been talking more and been having the conversations we should have had years ago. We are now more open and positive and we are both parent supporters and helping others. We have supported each other's needs for study and I have gone on to study to be a counsellor. Our marriage has been strengthened as we know we have been through so much.”* [Lisa](#)

*“We have understood the preciousness of life, of any relationship. This puts everything else into perspective. Other things which used to be important are now not.”* [Jo](#)

*“Izak's death has made me realise what's important in life. He has helped me find a stronger focus on family and on living life to the fullest. I say we are stronger, better people because of him.”* [Mark](#)





*“ Brendan is way more family focussed now and wants to be a house-husband and be supportive of my career as a midwife. He’s now more balanced and hasn’t run off to bury himself in work outside the family – a good listener and a great carer to me.” Paula*

This strengthening of your relationship won’t happen overnight but will emerge by engaging with grieving, often over many years. It is a journey which requires commitment, patience and courage.

### **Deciding to stay together and survive**

If you are determined and focus on your strengths, not on what you have lost, then you are more likely to stay together. Some parents are committed to live a life their child would have been proud of, to become stronger and closer as a family.

If having a child was crucial in keeping you together, the challenge will be to find or develop new bonds or other ways of ensuring that your child continues to be a major link between you and your partner. With patience, new and stronger ties can develop.

*“ We can’t let this destroy us! There is no one in the world who understands what we have been through except each other and no one else fully understands and acknowledges how unique and precious our child was.” Sue*

*“ Don’t make quick decisions about your relationship.” Jenny O’N*

*“ We realised the importance of good communication and supporting each other. We understood that this would be important for our children to have in their family.” Linda B*

*“ Paul said the day after Samuel died, ‘We will have to work very hard at keeping us together’. We were determined to work on staying together and we don’t give up easily. We decided that we would try hard and give it the time but there were no guarantees we would stay together.” Jenny R*

## Developing positive attitudes

Throughout this booklet, the importance of engaging with change, acknowledging differences and nurturing one another has been regularly emphasised. Let us review some of the positive attitudes that can help you to cope:

Don't be afraid of change. It is fundamental to life. Embracing it is essential if you are to heal and grow. It is a powerful transforming force. There are many accounts of how people have come to terms with change.

**“ Margaret’s legacy is the work I now do in the funeral industry. It has given me passion and strength.” Michelle**

Accept that you and your partner will do things differently and that one way is not necessarily better than the other. Respect and understanding, seeing the world through someone else’s eyes, are important.

**“ Accept the differences – acceptance is the key to a supportive and nurturing relationship.” Jo**

**“ Respect each other, be patient and give each other space to grieve.” Lisa**

**“ Accept differences between you, no matter how difficult – you cannot change your partner. Relationships can become bad before they get better. It is not the end when they do so.” Jenny R**

**“ Everyone is different in the way they grieve. Be tolerant and accept differences.” Eva**

**“ Early on I discovered a determination to keep living life, and to ensure that my wife and children keep living their lives as best they can, and that keeps us going.” Bas**

Share the significance and meaning of the death with each other. Talking is how unreal experiences and devastated emotions can be



explored and managed. It helps restore intimacy and provides moral support. However, do so gradually and sensitively, because for some people talking can be a source of discomfort and difficulty.

**“ Regularly touch base with each other – ‘pillow talk’ at night.”**  
Fiona

**“ The key to surviving this grief is communication and trust, opening up to each other.”** Linda Y

Seek help and encourage your partner to do likewise but do not pressure them. This can be counterproductive. People need space and time to themselves. Rather, work on your own issues and meeting your own needs.

**“ Allow supportive people to support you – people who don’t need to ‘fix it’ for you – a friend or a counsellor.”** Lisa

**“ Give each other a certain amount of time each day without interrupting and judging. Also, a counsellor can give you strategies to cope, help identify how each of you is grieving and accept differences.”** Deanne

Acknowledge your grief. Don’t mask it, put it on hold or use it as a crutch. Sooner or later it will have to be dealt with. Be kind to yourself.

**“ This is your time. Give yourself permission to be self-centred. Plan ahead for special days; candle burning or writing a letter on a balloon can be healing.”** Linda Y

**“ Don’t put pressure on yourself, particularly at special times such as Christmas and birthdays.”** Jenny R

**“ It is good to take time to periodically reflect on your grief journey, what has happened and how you are going.”** Linda B

**“ You might need more help three or four years up the track.”**

Jane

## Other helpful strategies

Don't be afraid to try things out. There is much you can do to help yourself including the following:

Learn more about grief, the many forms it can take and the impact that it could have on your relationships. There is a great deal of valuable literature available including the material listed at the end of this booklet and in other Red Nose Grief and Loss resources.

**“ Reading about the more common differences between men's and women's grief can be really helpful and reduce misunderstandings. It's so important to acknowledge that men and women can grieve differently and to accept that, so you don't move apart more.”** Tracey

Speak with other bereaved people. Find people you feel safe with and who will just listen and be with you, either individually or in a group. It can help to normalise your own experience.

**“ Talk to someone who has been through a similar situation, someone further up the track to give you hope that you will function again and to know what to expect.”** Fiona

Take care of yourself because it is easy to become sick when under huge stress. Eat well. Physical activities can energise you, nurture your spirit and provide a focus outside your grief. Sports, gym, meditation, relaxation techniques, yoga, massage and long walks, runs or bike rides can help you deal with stress. If possible, ensure that such activities take place in beautiful, natural environments. You might also need to seek the help of health professionals.

**“ Jenny liked a lot of time alone, having peace and quiet to relax. I enjoyed lots of sport, cricket, exercise and socialising as a way of coping with stress – time away.”** Robert O'N



“What helped Wayne was to go on long bike rides on his Harley, Ipod in his ears, ‘time out’ just for him. He said he needed ‘time away from this nightmare: when is this ever going to end?’ I encouraged him to go.” [Deanne](#)

“Exercise to help with the stress, the extra adrenalin grief can cause. You already feel so tired and drained but you will feel so glad you have done it – more energised afterwards.” [Linda B](#)

“Yoga, meditation, massage and walking are very helpful to de-stress. Also seeing a naturopath and taking particular vitamins, minerals and herbs to assist with stress, sleep and vitality and to improve one’s diet.” [Danielle](#)

“Learning particular meditation and relaxation techniques, e.g. body scanning helped me enormously. I still do them twice daily, years later.” [Jane](#)

Cultivate activities which help maintain the connection with your child in whatever ways are most meaningful for you and your family. For example, make the casket, design a special garden, visit the grave, develop a project together, establish a ritual, create a painting, sculpture, music, song or poetry. Such activities provide focus and become valuable ways of honouring the life of your child.

“Set goals – do something for you and your child such as a personal challenge. I did the ninety mile beach walk and raised funds. I felt so close to Caity as I was walking.” [Linda Y](#)

“It took me a long time to accept that our ten tries at IVF didn’t work. I channelled a lot of my energy to bring about changes in permanent care legislation. This helped me.” [Ruth](#)

## Counselling

Counselling, either as an individual or as a couple, provides a safe space where you will be supported to move through your grief and

understand its impact. It can help you to learn new strategies for dealing with anger and resentment, such as giving each other time out when things get too tough, texting each other rather than confronting each other when you feel angry. Perhaps you can write down what you are angry about before you try to talk it through.

Counselling takes courage and commitment. You and your partner could have different views about its value; it might be wanted more by one of you than the other. It can be difficult to talk about intimate aspects of a relationship with a professional (or third party).

Sometimes the involvement of one partner draws criticism from the other, either for attending in the first place or listening to the advice of others, which can be threatening. It is important to talk these issues through and support each other's needs, for participation in counselling can lead to making positive changes.

*“ Having couple-counselling was the most helpful thing we did to help us to grieve as a couple again, not just as individuals.”* [Jessica](#)

*“ Geoff didn't want counselling so I asked the counsellor for particular questions that I could ask Geoff. He has a big public profile so grieving privately is important to him.”* [Fiona](#)

*“ Embark on appropriate couple counselling sooner rather than later. We only started last year and it has been somewhat soul destroying to discover the things we should have discussed so much earlier. It has caused isolation for both of us in the years since Lexie's death and perhaps if we had talked to a qualified person earlier, the damage would have been less.”*  
[Joanne](#)

*“ It is not a sign of weakness to get professional help. It can help to get you on track with your relationship.”* [Leanne](#)



*“ There is a limit on how much you can do to help yourself. Get professional help even if you don't think you need it. Be alert to how the two of you may be drifting apart and focus on communicating well.”* [Jenny O’N](#)

*“ It wasn't until about a year after Madeleine's death that I felt like I was ready to start talking about the experiences I'd had. Once I started seeing a counsellor one-on-one, I started to get a better idea of what I was going through and Jeanette started seeing the same counsellor. It allowed us to gain insight into how each other was grieving. We were able to understand better the things that got us down and those that stopped us functioning. We were able to discuss ways of supporting one another and of avoiding shutting down. It was a challenging time but one of tremendous growth in our relationship.”* [Greg](#)

Red Nose Grief and Loss provide counsellors who can assist with these issues without charge — individually or as a couple. They also provide support groups, contact with a trained Parent Support (a bereaved parent), art therapy, a weekend residential program (Personal Enrichment Program or PEP), a Walk to Remember and other remembrance activities, workshops for bereaved siblings and an internet forum.

## Support groups

These provide a chance to talk, be understood, share and help normalise feelings and experiences; a safety valve for the relationship. For those of you who cannot attend these groups or don't have people in your network with whom you can talk, the grieving period can be very lonely and isolating. This is especially so for men, whose main support is more likely to be their partner.

*“ Seek out and utilise support agencies, find support which suits you. This means you will have support when you need it.”*  
[Lisa](#)

“It helps to meet others in support groups and see how they are coping. This helped us and gave us hope, especially hearing from parent supporters. They showed how you can heal and that you can go on to have other children.” [Jessica](#)

“Accept that men are more likely to grieve privately and talk only with their partner and more women prefer group support.”  
[Tracey](#)

“The support groups were helpful, especially for me, as they were a place where we could both keep talking about Emily – the only place really where we felt comfortable to do so.” [Pam](#)

“I found it enormously helpful attending support groups. They have helped me to realise that what I have felt and was going through was normal and that it was okay to cry and be sad and to go at my own pace. All blokes in my situation should think about going to some sort of support group. I was hesitant at first but now I go when I can.” [Dion](#)

“At support groups for men you usually find there are other fathers who can at least understand what you are talking about and some of the things you have been through. It is really important to share your experiences in an environment in which others will listen and understand.” [Bas](#)

## In conclusion... looking towards the future

A child's death is likely to change some of your relationships, both in the short term as well as into the future. Some will become stronger and deeper, while others will seem less important over time. Facing adversity together, being forced to grow through the shared experience of your child's death and finding comfort in each other, can lead to a deeper intimacy and a more meaningful life.

The relationships of many parents have been strengthened over time. They have developed such qualities as greater humility, tolerance and





generosity. Some have become less materialistic, more spiritual and forgiving, less controlling of others and they value their children more.

The parents and grandparents who contributed to this booklet have provided many insights into how they negotiated relationships with family, friends, colleagues and others in their networks after the death of their child or grandchild.

In cultivating such qualities, it is important to:

- Remember, to look after yourself, emotionally as well as physically.
- Find people with whom you feel safe, who will just listen and be with you without judging.
- Maintain your connection with your child, in whatever way is most meaningful for you and your family.
- Accept that you will have flashbacks and that grief will well up periodically. Coming to terms with the death could take many years, possibly the rest of your life. This may affect one of you more than the other.
- Try not to make hasty decisions about relationships or anything else.
- Remember to seek out support when you feel you are struggling, whether it is through counselling, support groups, online chat rooms or forums.

In the following section, the journeys of three couples and two individuals are described in more depth.

# Part 3: Individual stories of journeys through grief

## Nathan and Naomi

Nathan and Naomi had three miscarriages before the stillbirth of Ethan, who was diagnosed with severe abnormalities. Working in the area of disability, Naomi knew Ethan had no chance of any quality of life were he to survive the pregnancy. They now have two daughters and a son.

At the time of the birth Nathan worked six days a week, enjoyed time with his mates and watched a lot of sport on TV. Before the pregnancy they met up with friends at the pub but this stopped when Naomi became pregnant and focussed on her health. Nathan and Naomi had different interests and lived quite separate lives.

Most of Naomi's friends lived interstate and she found making new friends difficult. Her work in disability was important to her but she found it too difficult to return to work after Ethan's death.

**“ I now work in a different area, not disability [since our disabled son was stillborn]. I had little support from management and I couldn't talk to workmates who were supporting families with a disabled child – it was too confronting and I didn't volunteer our situation.” Naomi**

Nathan worked very hard, needing to keep busy and to distract himself from his grief. He felt that everything he suggested to Naomi to help her wasn't taken up, or didn't fix her grief, leaving him feeling helpless and frustrated.

Naomi was at home and very much alone, and when Nathan returned at night, she needed to talk and talk. Exhausted by her grief, he would escape by going out with his mates. She felt cut off by him, fearing that their relationship would break up and her dream of a family would never happen.



**“ We lived very separate lives, had different interests. I felt shut out by him, feeling he didn't want to spend time with me. A chasm was developing between us and I feared losing him as well.” Naomi**

Nathan came from a family which didn't talk about feelings and emotions, so he didn't want to discuss the loss or listen to her. He has since realised he was afraid of feeling the grief, couldn't accept her fears that they would never have a family and believed that he was quite okay about never having children. They were poles apart.

Naomi lost much of the confidence she had always had at work and even simple decisions, such as what to cook for dinner or which couch to buy, became too hard. Nathan, unhappy, unsupported and lacking confidence at work, was frustrated by Naomi's indecisiveness. Tension in the relationship worsened.

This was the first big test of their relationship and it became obvious that both had problems communicating effectively, especially about intense feelings and their expectations about life and marriage. They needed to learn how to listen to each other and find interests in common. Naomi also needed to find others to listen to her grief, so there would be less pressure on their relationship and on Nathan, and to become assertive about her own needs.

**“ It's important to tell others of your needs, because if you don't, how would they possibly know? For example, when Nathan returned to work and I was at home, I should have told them I needed company.” Naomi**

Counselling and attending a support group helped immensely. She made new friends and was able to express her grief. She read about patterns of grieving and realised that while she and Nathan were grieving in different ways, both approaches were normal. Developing her own interests became important to her.

**“ Accept differences; people do get through this differently, they do survive. I could do things for myself and then give Nathan information. I couldn't make him do anything, couldn't fix it for him, I had to give him time. I had to deal with my own**

*stuff and go somewhere else to have my needs met. This helped put less pressure on our relationship.”*

She realised that she wanted Nathan to grieve but also to be the strong one and to fix her grief – quite unrealistic expectations. Gradually Naomi came to understand that Nathan didn’t have the energy or skills to do this, especially as he was grieving too, and that he needed to be with his mates.

**“ You have to have part of your life that’s normal, where you can talk the mundane stuff – have a grief-free zone.” Nathan**

Six months after the death Nathan crashed emotionally and his health suffered. So much energy had been taken up with work and bottling up his feelings. He started to attend some support groups and gradually realised that he didn’t have to be the strong one and he should talk about his feelings too.

Naomi, supported by others, became less needy and their relationship less intense. Feeling under less pressure Nathan now had time to deal with his grief. They decided to try for another pregnancy and today they have three subsequent children. Family is of great importance to both of them and they have more interests in common.

Naomi has learned to accept responsibility for her own grief and needs and to communicate better, realising she has been emotionally closed as well. In turn, Nathan feels that he has changed positively and they both have a better appreciation of family and friends. Today they have many more friends and their life is child centred. Nathan no longer meets up with drinking buddies and Naomi keeps in contact with many people she met through the support groups as well. They accept each other’s differences and are more tolerant of each other.

**“ I have kept maturing since Ethan died and now deal with things more calmly. I find it easier to talk to people about my problems and am more empathic to others and can cope with their emotions. Naomi says that my family find me easier to be with and I am now closer to my brothers ... there are now more family functions.” Nathan**



*“ We are closer to people with whom we didn't expect to be and not as close to those we expected more from – unfortunately you find out who your friends are. Old friends aren't friends anymore and priorities change. My mother didn't come over from Adelaide to support me and I know now why and that she regrets this. It is still a wedge between us. It's taken time for me to accept that my sister will never be there for me for the important stuff.”*

Naomi

*“ We are now very close to Nathan's mum. It is almost a shared grief. We are so touched she has grieved for us and for Ethan; she really loved him.”* Naomi

Naomi and Nathan feel they have learned a lot about each other and what is important in life, especially family. They now communicate in more respectful and assertive ways.

*“ We are now more protective of our relationship and worry less about what others think. We assume less and check in with each other more and do more together. We now accept the 'new normal' – this is the way it is and that's okay.”* Nathan

# Danielle and Jake

Danielle and Jake already had one son, Alex, when Bennett was born prematurely and died soon after birth. They come from very different backgrounds – Danielle from a Mediterranean migrant family and Jake from an Anglo/Irish background. He was born in a small Australian country town. They now have another son, Dominic.

Even before their son's death, Danielle and Jake had a high maintenance relationship and undergone couple counselling. Jake found fatherhood particularly difficult and to compound this situation, they came from very different families.

**“ We're loud, and we let others know when we are upset while Jake's family are more introverted, avoid conflict and don't talk through issues.”** [Danielle](#)

**“ Danielle is a talker, a screamer, whilst I come from a family which doesn't talk through issues. We weren't encouraged to talk about feelings at all.”** [Jake](#)

People in Jake's family, especially the men, talked about things such as sport and never about relationships, feelings or anything which could bring on conflict. They were taught to be stoic and undemonstrative.

**“ My dad was not a good role model. The only time he touched me was a pat on the shoulder after Bennett died.”** [Jake](#)

Jake thought he was laid back and that nothing worried him, but realises now that he was very much out of contact with his emotions. Danielle's family was demonstrative and there was always lots of yelling and arguments which Jake found difficult to cope with.

**“ I tended to want to escape the emotion but the more I withdrew, the more emotional Danielle would get. I became the conduit for her emotions.”** [Jake](#)



Initially they were supportive and sensitive to each other's grief but different issues emerged as they found it increasingly difficult to cope.

**“ Life was simpler than it is now. We could regroup and just focus on Alex and each other. Later on we lost this focus as our lives became busier and more complicated. We couldn't cope with even the most minor day-to-day stuff and I just felt paralysed. The grief seemed to destroy our resilience. This put a lot of pressure on our relationship.”** Jake

Jake retreated from friends and felt very much alone. They began to attend a support group together and Jake also went to a men's group. Later they had counselling, both together and apart. Jake's GP was very helpful and, for a while, saw him monthly.

**“ Three months after the death Jake was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress and went on anti-depressants. He realised that depression had been an underlying condition for some time.”**  
Danielle

Gradually Jake found ways to express his grief:

**“ Go to a men's group. To have a male perspective, to just be with other bereaved Dads helps; not to feel alone, having a couple of beers with mates, a time without grief. Let mates know how it is for you – even if they don't respond, you have put the genie out of the bottle. Telling them is enough to make you feel better. Get a tattoo of your child; it helps to start the conversation.”**

Jake has had to change as a person and relearn everything in the process of finding himself, particularly how to process issues. He feels he is now more sensitive and that grief will be a lifelong journey for him, as will coping with depression:

**“ It is normal to feel there is a yawning chasm between you for a while. Danielle has taught me to talk. ... I am a very different person now. I am not yet fully positive as to date I have lost more**

*than I have gained. I can see that continual changes will bring me to a better place, a different direction. I am a work in progress. I am still way behind Danielle but I am on a different path. I am slower and still negative. I realise this but it's part of the journey."*

Jake

With counselling support, Danielle has learned to change her way of communicating:

**“ In time I realised I had to channel my emotions and to learn how to really listen to him. I didn't hear things until much later. It took me time to really 'hear' him and not just to 'let rip'!”**

In time she has learnt to embrace the changes.

**“ It's sad but I can now focus on the positives, can embrace Bennett as part of the family. It's not all negative. We both cherish him as someone special. I am now more sensitive to losses in society but I can cope with that.”**

Danielle has also accepted that they needed to deal with things at a different pace and Jake agrees:

**“ Accept that your partner will process the grief differently, may need much more time than you do. We are very different people and we went on different paths in our grief.”** Danielle

**“ Grief has highlighted how different we are at processing things, how we do things differently. Slowly we are getting better at addressing these differences and not falling into a pit.”** Jake

She had friends who supported her well. Yoga and meditation helped her immensely and seeing a naturopath was invaluable in relation to stress and diet. Unfortunately her father also died and she needed time to support her family, especially her mum.

She has grown enormously through her grief, both spiritually and as a communicator, and now helps others as a parent supporter and as a yoga teacher.





*“ I have learnt so much about myself which has been life changing. It's been good for my growth. I have learned strategies to help myself. It's a good path, the right path. I am happy to be on it. I have made a positive out of a negative. I have come into my own as a person.”*

Jake has also come to important realisations:

*“ In the past I was 'laid back' and could brush things off, get over things. I can't do that now as I am more sensitive. I have slowly become more aware of my responses ...and now I have to handle things very differently ... for me the changes have been evolutionary, not revolutionary.”*

Their relationship has survived and their fundamental values are strong. Thirteen months after Bennett died they decided on having another child and this has given them a common purpose.

## Jenny and Robert

Jenny and Robert's first daughter, Emma, was born earlier than planned so they had responsibilities early on in their marriage. Jenny had severe pre-eclampsia in her next pregnancy which couldn't be controlled by medication so she became very ill. Lily's birth was induced and she lived only one hour. They now have another daughter, Lucy.

After the birth Jenny's health issues meant that Robert had to care both for her and Emma. Feeling that this was the best way to support her, he tried to shield Jenny from his pain, thinking she wouldn't be able to cope with his grief as well as her own. He needed to work, in the process avoiding his grief which he didn't acknowledge for some time.

Jenny tried to focus on becoming well again but after a few months she, too, returned to work. She wanted to get out of the 'cycle of thinking' while at home which was also stifling Robert's own need to grieve. However, she felt that only Robert could fully understand her grief and that she could not move on without having another child. Her doctor advised her to wait a year for her health to be restored.

Robert was not ready for another child, concerned about the potential impact on Jenny's health. He had been traumatised when Jenny nearly died during the birth and feared a repetition of this with a subsequent pregnancy. Compounding this he wanted a normal life, 'to have fun again' and resented the impact of grief on their relationship. Despite having several sessions with a counsellor, he felt he couldn't support Jenny or listen to her grief.

**“ She was miserable for one hundred per cent of the time and I couldn't fix it. I didn't have the energy or the resources to be Jenny's counsellor and I felt like going away by myself.”**

The tension between them grew. It angered Jenny that Robert wanted her to move on. The tension between them was impacting on their daughter, so they sought couple counselling. Without it they feel that they would probably have broken up. This gave Robert space to grieve and he realised he had pushed aside his own grief to keep the family going. Jenny gradually understood that she had been oblivious to what



he had been going through. His needs had been obscured by her illness and having to care for their daughter. Counselling also helped them to learn new ways of handling conflict.

**“ He had been scarred by his time with Lily while I had no memory of that at all. I had never heard him talk about that until we had counselling. It was good for me to see him grieve as I thought he had pushed it aside. There is a limit to how much you can do to help yourself. It is valuable to get professional help.”**

Jenny

**“ Regarding conflict, I would want to talk it out while he would try to smooth it over and avoid it.”** Jenny

**“ In time I acknowledged that I had been resentful that the grief had been overtaking the relationship.”** Robert

New strategies helped, such as texting each other when they were angry instead of confrontation, writing down what they were angry about and giving Robert ‘time out’ (e.g. playing sport, socialising with mates). They accepted that they had different ways of handling stress, Jenny by having time alone and Robert by having outlets. They began to share more and communicate about the ‘tough stuff’. After two years and considerable medical support Robert accepted Jenny’s need for another baby, despite the potential risks.

**“ If it was for me I wouldn’t have tried for another baby. I had been happy with my family; for me it wasn’t incomplete. However, it became clear to me that only by having another baby would Jenny have resolution of her grief; otherwise we wouldn’t move on in our lives.”**

Jenny and Robert felt comfortable about asking family and friends for practical support while, at the same time, learning to accept that some people couldn’t always ‘be there’ for them.

**“ Accepting that friends won’t be able to support you, won’t be able to cope with your grief, meant that we didn’t lose friends. I too would be at a loss with someone else’s grief.”** Jenny

They didn't feel the need to attend support groups, preferring couple counselling which helped them to realise that grief puts a lot of stress on relationships.

“ Don't underestimate the stress on your relationship and its impact on daily life. It is easy to see your partner wound up over little things and not realise it is really part of grief. Today we understand that we totally underestimated the length and breadth of grieving for Lily.” [Jenny](#)

“ With time the grief does change. It won't disappear but it need not dominate your lives as it did in the beginning. For us, just 'hanging in' and time itself, helped. Gradually as grief moved into a new stage, being less dominant, less intense, Jenny wasn't in that black hole as often. Be patient, especially in the first six months. Life does return to normal, even if a new normal. Be conscious that you and your partner will be at different stages at different times.” [Robert](#)

Another baby was very healing for Jenny and she feels she approaches motherhood very differently now.

“ In the past I was torn between career and motherhood. Now I realise that being with children is where I want to be”.

Their lives have been transformed in many ways, both with their daughters and each other.

“ I have so much joy in the kids, and have realised how precious children are. You become conscious of every little stage they go through.” [Robert](#)

“ I'm pretty strong and I am calmer than I have ever been. Lucy's birth marks the end of that period for us. Its been very healing for us, especially for me. Lucy doesn't replace Lily but she fills the gap of wanting a second child. We now understand each other more and accept our differences. We communicate better than we used to. Time has helped us.” [Jenny](#)



# Amy

Amy and her husband Jerome were living in the UK, where his parents lived. Amy's mother and other close family members and friends were in Australia. Their son, Marcus, became seriously ill and died at 14 weeks. Amy also had another son Leo who lived just 14 months. They are now divorced and she has a daughter from another relationship.

Amy and Jerome's relationship had been loving and nurturing and they communicated openly. She had been at home with Marcus every day while Jerome was at work. Initially their sadness was shared, as they both felt lost and cried together. However, she soon fell apart as she became very needy and couldn't cope with any external stresses. She also expressed her grief very differently from Jerome, grieving openly and becoming very depressed.

***“ I wanted to fall into my grief and let it take me along and heal naturally. I didn't think it was something that could be rushed or minimised.”***

Jerome tried to remain strong and to fix her grief. Amy had always been a person who took care of everyone and everything. Seeing her unable to cope was very disconcerting for Jerome, as she had always been the stronger partner.

They attended counselling together and Amy also went on her own to another counsellor. This helped them to express themselves and to work through some issues. However, arguments and friction arose as they both wanted to move in different directions, continuing to grieve differently.

***“ Ultimately we were drifting. I wanted to focus on family and having another child while he preferred to have fun again and return to a simple existence. I felt there was no turning back.”***

Their support structures were also different and this concerned Amy.

***“ My partner had his family to support him but mine was in a different country. I became resentful and hostile towards***

*his family, as they couldn't cope with my outward display of emotion. This was particularly true of his mother, who said she was 'moving on' after the funeral and couldn't cope with my ongoing tears and devastation. Jerome found this difficult and it caused friction between us. We began to withdraw from each other, me into myself and he moving closer to his family."*

Eventually, they separated and Amy returned to Australia. They divorced and Jerome repartnered but has had no other children. Amy said they have remained friends.

*“ Although we divorced and live in different countries, we remain in close contact by written communication. Our relationship improved once I'd left and we could move forward in our lives separately. We are supportive of each other now, once again.”*

Some of Amy's relationships have grown stronger while others she has let slide. She is also now closer to her old friends in Australia, has reconciled with a sister and is in contact with her ex-sister-in-law. She has learnt much from this experience.

*“ I look back now and see that my marriage needed to end and it wasn't only because of the death of our son. Our lives have gone in vastly different directions but we are still able to support each other from afar on those special dates. We never argued or fell out but had we stayed together it may have been a different story. He has not had any more children and is still heavily burdened and defined by our loss. I went on to have another son, now also deceased, who solved the genetic mystery. Then subsequently, finally, a healthy daughter. I never gave up the dream of motherhood and I'm proud and thankful for that determination and resilience. I'm also glad to be raising her here in Australia surrounded by my family. Life feels very much as it should be and my sons each have their pride of place within that life. I'm ever thankful for them and to them, for they have helped shape the woman I am today as everyone's children do. I am happy”*



Amy is now a trained parent supporter and studying to be a counsellor. She believes that it is important to keep lines of communication open with the parent of your child and that the process of grief and one's needs change. She offers this advice:

*“ Change is not necessarily a bad thing and relationships can get stronger through loss”.*

*“ Be patient! Grief is a long and painful process, perhaps endless, but the way you deal with it and the way it affects your life and relationships change with time. Don't rush anything and don't make any major changes in the first eighteen months following the death of a child.”*

*“ You may drift from your partner but don't burn the bridge. They are likely to be the only other person who really cherishes and keeps alive the memories of your child the way you do and it's invaluable to have someone to talk to about your child when you want or need to. Even if it's just a text message on birthdays and anniversaries to say you are both thinking of the child, it helps.”*

# Josie

Josie and Gino, both of Italian background, had two daughters and a son Justin who drowned when he was almost three. They separated five years later, reconciled and had another daughter. However, they separated again and are now divorced.

Initially Josie was overwhelmed and she broke down, totally absorbed in her grief. She had no energy for anyone else, just enough for survival, separating herself from her family, and relying on Gino to keep it afloat.

**“Totally absorbed in my own grief I felt that I wouldn’t survive and became suicidal. Totally passive I relied on Gino to carry and support us, but didn’t communicate this to him as I was so absorbed in my own pain. I just accepted what was happening.”**

Gino returned to work in his own business, after a week, working long hours. He thought this was the best way to support his family. While he appeared to be resilient, Josie thought he was not grieving, at least not as much as she was, and that he lacked compassion. She believed that he couldn’t show his love for their son as much as she did.

**“How could he keep going? How could he function and ignore ‘the elephant in the room’? I felt too disconnected from him and the anger and resentment at this perceived lack of grieving on his part grew. I didn’t understand that he was grieving differently.”**

Josie also felt responsible for Justin’s death but the guilt was too hard to acknowledge.

**“I felt very guilty as I was the supervising parent when Justin drowned. I transferred the blame, the guilt, onto my husband as he was not there. He was working to get money for his hobby car. I was angry that his need for this was more important than the family unit. He was not the partner I needed.”**

She had expected Gino to remain strong and keep the family going, while at the same time feeling her emotive way of grieving was more





profound than his. Reading about the different styles of grieving between men and women didn't register in her as much as it should have.

**“ I still resented that he was not there for me ... wanting him to mourn with me, grieve with me, cry with me, and share the grief. I wanted the impossible.”**

Long hours at work meant that Gino was physically and emotionally exhausted and would fall asleep in marriage counselling sessions. Josie never fully understood this, feeling that he was oblivious to there being issues in their marriage. She over simplified things, regarding his attitude as “we're eating, we have a roof over our heads ... what is the problem?”

Josie went to several support groups and there found the empathy that she needed and didn't have in her key relationship which continued to deteriorate. Five years later they split up as she had no room for him, as he was then, in her life.

**“ I was not only separating myself from Gino but also from my grief. I connected him to the pain of losing Justin. By removing myself from Gino, I felt I was also removing myself from the grief.”**

Two years later they reconciled briefly and had another daughter, but this didn't resolve anything. They later divorced.

**“ I had tried to put it all behind me and reunite the family but I was only kidding myself. I realised I had to separate from Gino completely for the sake of my mental health. I couldn't cope with the grief as well as the void in my marriage. I felt I was drowning like Justin. There were too many pre-existing problems in the relationship which were magnified by the death. Even if Justin hadn't died we probably would have split up as these fundamental differences needed to be addressed.”**

Gino neither understood nor agreed with this position, feeling that Josie had put her own needs above that of the family unit and didn't 'hang in' long enough. These days Josie does have some regrets:

**“ I wish I had tried harder to keep the family unit together because no matter where you are or who you are with, you take the grief with you. You can't run away from it. There is no escaping the work you need to do to come out the other end. As much as you desperately wish you could snap your fingers to remove the pain, grief takes its own time.”**

Fundamentally, they could never agree about how they wanted to live. Gino was happy being a family man, focussing on working hard to be the provider; for him it was enough. He didn't want change. However, Josie's values and priorities had fundamentally changed and she yearned for a life that was less 'materialistic and superficial.'

**“ I wanted to be a role model for my girls, a positive, strong individual, who is a community-minded citizen, a valued asset, an ethical contributor to society. I not only wanted to be a family-focussed person but wanted to extend beyond myself and focus on the needs of community and beyond. I also wanted to be embraced, supported and encouraged by Gino. This didn't happen so we parted ways.”**

Josie also felt that no-one in her insular, personal networks understood her grief and that many had responded in totally inappropriate ways.

**“ I distanced myself from these people to protect myself. I separated key relationships by maintaining them on a purely functional level. I migrated towards other bereaved people and learned strategies to live in this world of grief and pain. Mutual support groups became my lifeline.”**

She has changed profoundly and learned much from this experience:

**“ Being understood and in turn understanding others, through the lived experience, becomes a powerful form of healing like no other professional therapy available. It creates an instant bond and connection between those with a similar experience that is authentic, supportive and effective. It provides safety for the giver and normalises feelings.”**



*“ Reaching out to other mothers is particularly important. Through the power of story-telling and shared experience, bereaved mothers can become invaluable role models for each other. The bond is awesome, a relationship of strength - an energy so powerful you cannot express it in words.”*

*“ At the same time we must all still travel our own journeys, finding our unique way forward; there is no right or wrong way to grieve. Be gentle with yourself, your partner and significant others. You will emerge discovering a new you and be ready to forgive yourself for what has happened. Only then will you be able to accept and be loving to yourself, thus enabling you to begin to embrace your future.”*

Today Josie's vocation is in grief and loss. She has worked in the bereavement sector for over a decade and is passionate about mutual self-help and peer support. This honours her son's life. His legacy is one of her being there for others, in the same way that they have supported her. This is how the bereaved network grows, strengthening all concerned.

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