

STRENGTH FOR YOUR JOURNEY

The Value of a Smile

Part 2 of a Series by Chris Harder

Our smile can be a gauge of where we are in our grief journey. In those first days after our child died when we were consumed by that dark cloud of grief, our smile was turned upside down, reflecting the depth of our sadness. We couldn't imagine ever being able to smile again.

After those initial days and weeks, many of us thought, "This pain [of losing him or her] hurts so much...what can I do to make it go away?" Most of us didn't want to remain in that horrible, gut wrenching state

Where the tragedy of losing a child took us. Smiling through our tears, even if it's a smile of resignation as we shrug our shoulders, may be the first sign that we have the resilience within us to begin moving forward.



My friend Carol struggles with depression. I've observed that whenever she talks about her struggles, she always ends the conversation by making a comment like, "But I never give up, I always count my blessings," and she smiles through her tears. After my son, Zack, died, I remembered Carol and decided to try her technique. My daughter was selling cosmetics at that time and I asked her to bring me a tube of waterproof mascara. When she arrived with the delivery, we chatted a bit and we cried. Not only had I lost a son, but she had lost her youngest brother. As we ended our conversation, I added, "But at least now I have my waterproof mascara!" We both laughed. I remember feeling better because I had been able to smile.

Sometimes it's hard to force a smile, but sometimes we have to. It's what gets us through the hard times.

Grief is extremely stressful and it shows on our faces. Prolonged stress will adversely affect our health. It causes high blood pressure and lowers our immune system. If we are going to survive the loss of our child, we need periodic breaks from the intense stress of grief. A stress-relieving smile can provide us with a quick moment of relief from grief's hold on us. It may be difficult for us to muster up enough energy to smile if we are by ourselves, but when we are with people who understand what we are going through, their reassurance may help us.

The death of a child is depressing and often makes us wonder if we will ever be happy again. As I struggled through the months following Zack's death, I became

weary of crying and the constant presence of grief. I couldn't control that dreadful feeling, but I did notice that I began to feel different. I cried less and felt like smiling more often. The opposite of depressed is joyful, so as my depression lifted, my joy from within increased.

A normal reaction in grief is to resist happiness. It's common to say, "How can I laugh when my child has died?" We need to give ourselves permission to laugh again. If we allow ourselves to feel guilt when we laugh or feel happy, it could cause us to get stuck in our grief.

I'll never forget the time I enjoyed a good old belly laugh! Wow! It felt so G-O-O-D! I don't remember what brought it on, but I do recall how freeing it was. There's a Bible verse that says, "A joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones." (Proverbs 17:22). Having a good laugh was amazingly healing and showed me that I had the ability to enjoy life once again. King Saul of Israel wrote in Ecclesiastes 3:40, "There's a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance." Time doesn't heal our sorrow, but it does allow us to process our grief. As time goes by, we can feel joyful again.

One of my favorite activities during our monthly moms gatherings is when we take our group picture. We always chatter and laugh as we stand close together. We take at least 3 pictures, because it seems that "the third one is always the best." What do people tend to do when they know their picture is being taken? They smile so they will look their best. It's interesting to notice the expressions on the moms' faces as we look back at the pictures we've taken from month to month. When a new mom comes, her smile is strained and she probably wonders how the others can smile. But as the months go by, and she continues to come to the gatherings, her countenance changes as "we help each other learn how to smile again."

Many of us have heard the saying, "Laughter is good for the soul." It's true! It doesn't come easily after a loss so tragic as the death of a child, but in time, we will smile, and we will laugh again. I hope you will take a moment and look back to see how your smile has been a reflection of your emotional progress on your journey of grief.

A smile is daylight for the discouraged, sunshine to the sad, and nature's antidote for depression.