

# What I Wish More People Understood About Losing A Child

By Paula Stephens, from <http://www.mindbodygreen.com/0-17928/what-i-wish-more-people-understood-about-losing-a-child.html>

**F**our and half years after the death of my oldest son, I finally went to a grief support group for parents who have lost children. I went to support a friend who recently lost her son. I'm not sure I would've gone except that when I was in her shoes, four years ago, I wish I would've had a friend to go with me. Losing a child is the loneliest, most desolate journey a person can take and the only people who can come close to appreciating it are those who share the experience.

The meeting was a local chapter of The Compassionate Friends, an organization solely dedicated to providing support for those who have lost children, grandchildren or siblings. The facilitator was a tall gentleman who had lost his 17 year old son eight years ago. He opened the meeting by saying that dues to belong to the club are more than anyone would ever want to pay. Well, he couldn't be more correct: no one wants to belong to this group.

The group of incredible survivors included parents whose children had been killed by drunk drivers, murdered, accidental overdose, alcoholism, suicide and freak accidents. The children's ages ranged from 6-38 years old. When hearing the stories, I had a visceral reaction to being part of this "club," but was also humbled by the greatness of these mothers and fathers.

Most of what I share in this article came from this meeting, but also from my own experience of having lost a child and being four years into that lifelong journey of healing from deep grief. The following five tips can be your compass to help you navigate how to give support to grieving parents on a sacred journey they never wanted to take.

## 1. Remember our children.

The loss of children is a pain all bereaved parents share, and it is a degree of suffering that is impossible to grasp without experiencing it first hand. Often, when we know someone else is experiencing grief, our discomfort keeps us from approaching it head on. But we want the world to remember our child or children, no matter how young or old our child was.

If you see something that reminds you of my child, tell me. If you are reminded at the holidays or on his birthday that I am missing my son, please tell me you remember him. And when I speak his name or relive memories relive them with me, don't shrink away. If you never met my son, don't be afraid to ask about him. One of my greatest joys is talking about Brandon.

## 2. Accept that you can't "fix" us.

An out-of-order death such as child loss breaks a person (especially a parent) in a way that is not fixable or solvable — ever! We will learn to pick up the pieces and move forward, but our lives will never be the same.

Every grieving parent must find a way to continue to live with loss, and it's a solitary journey. We appreciate your support and

hope you can be patient with us as we find our way.

Please: don't tell us it's time to get back to life, that's it's been long enough, or that time heals all wounds. We welcome your support and love, and we know sometimes it hard to watch, but our sense of brokenness isn't going to go away. It is something to observe, recognize, accept.

## 3. Know that there are at least two days a year we need a time out.

We still count birthdays and fantasize what our child would be like if he/she were still living. Birthdays are especially hard for us. Our hearts ache to celebrate our child's arrival into this world, but we are left becoming intensely aware of the hole in our hearts instead. Some parents create rituals or have parties while others prefer solitude. Either way, we are likely going to need time to process the marking of another year without our child.

Then there's the anniversary of the date our child became an angel. This is a remarkable process similar to a parent of a newborn, first counting the days, then months then the one year anniversary, marking the time on the other side of that crevasse in our lives.

No matter how many years go by, the anniversary date of when our child died brings back deeply emotional memories and painful feelings (particularly if there is trauma associated with the child's death). The days leading up to that day can feel like impending doom or like it's hard to breathe. We may or may not share with you what's happening.

This is where the process of remembrance will help. If you have heard me speak of my child or supported me in remembering him/her, you will be able to put the pieces together and know when these tough days are approaching.

## 4. Realize that we struggle every day with happiness.

It's an ongoing battle to balance the pain and guilt of outliving your child with the desire to live in a way that honors them and their time on this earth.

I remember going on a family cruise eighteen months after Brandon died. On the first day, I stood at the back of the ship and bawled that I wasn't sharing this experience with him. Then I had to steady myself, and recognize that I was also creating memories with my surviving sons, and enjoying the time with them in the present moment.

As bereaved parents, we are constantly balancing holding grief in one hand and a happy life after loss in the other. You might observe this when you are with us at a wedding, graduation or other milestone celebration. Don't walk away — witness it with us and be part of our process.

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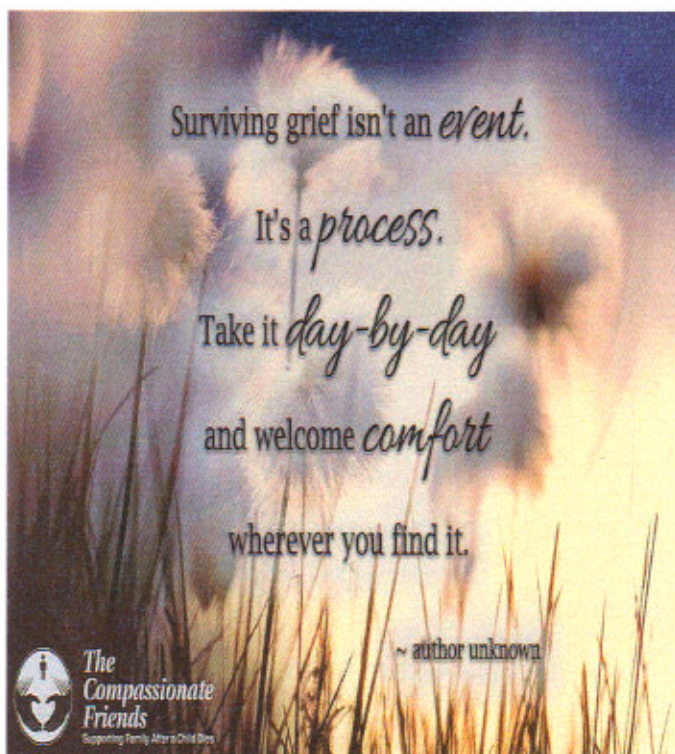
## What I Wish People Knew, cont.

5. Accept the fact that our loss might make you uncomfortable.

Our loss is unnatural, out-of-order; it challenges your sense of safety. You may not know what to say or do, and you're afraid you might make us lose it. We've learned all of this as part of what we're learning about grief.

We will never forget our child. And in fact, our loss is always right under the surface of other emotions, even happiness. We would rather lose it because you spoke his/her name and remembered our child, than try and shield ourselves from the pain and live in denial.

Grief is the pendulum swing of love. The stronger and deeper the love the more grief will be created on the other side. Consider it a sacred opportunity to stand shoulder to shoulder with someone who has endured one of life's most frightening events. Rise up with us.



## VACATION HELPFUL HINTS

*TCF National conference sharing session*

*The Compassionate Friends South Bay/L.A., CA July 2010*

Taking a vacation without your child with you can seem overwhelming. One family came up with a unique idea of including their departed child on their yearly vacation. First, they start by writing a short note describing how their daughter loved flowers and sharing the beauty of with others. By attaching it to a packet of flower seeds and leaving them where someone else was sure to find it, they felt they were sharing a part of their child with someone else. Now on each vacation they look forward to finding the perfect place to "plant" their gift to another in their child's memory.



## Healing Garden

By Desiree Aguirre, <http://bereavedparents.blogspot.com/2014/06/healing-garden.html>

**G**ardening is a wonderful activity that improves quality of life. Gardening helps people engage with the outdoors, which helps people become more aware of their surroundings, and more aware of time and seasonal activities. Best of all, gardening encourages the exposure to fresh air, sunlight, and exercise.

My garden is a healing garden, a living, breathing memorial for my son, Nikolas. Nik's garden, a hodgepodge of rocks, flowers, grass, vegetables, berries and shrubs, requires constant maintenance. An amateur gardener, I am blessed with numerous gardening friends that bring bulbs, shrubs, and flowers for my amusement. Even Nik's friends have made beautiful donations to his garden. Everyone provides detailed instructions on when, where, and how I should plant and provide for the plants.

When I work in the garden, I feel the vibrations of life. I witness the birth of glorious flowers, as well as the swallows that nest in a donated birdhouse every year. Best of all, I often devour my breakfast in the garden, snacking on organically grown, fresh and sweet blueberries, strawberries, raspberries, peas, spinach, carrots, cherry tomatoes, and beans. In addition, I get my daily allowance of sunshine, which helps ward off depression and keeps me connected to the earth.

Nik loved to eat corn home grown by the farmer down the road. Nik claimed that Leonard's corn was the sweetest corn on the planet. The corn growing in Nik's garden has that special flavor. It tastes sweet and fresh, and watching the stalks grow tall and strong brings happy memories.