

life after

THE LOSS OF YOUR CHILD

Hearing from Others Who Understand

A Grief  Share® BOOK

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Church Initiative: Providing help for people who are hurting

Our mission is to offer comfort, care, and resources to people hurting from life crises. Church Initiative is the creator of GriefShare, a grief support group ministry found in churches worldwide (griefshare.org). Our programs also include Loss of a Spouse (griefshare.org/loss), Surviving the Holidays (griefshare.org/holidays), and DivorceCare (divorcecare.org).

Before you begin

You've picked up this book because your life has been irrevocably changed. Maybe you've been going through the motions of living, but inside you wonder how you'll survive.

I'm inexpressibly sorry for the circumstances that have brought you here. None of this is easy—and you shouldn't have to carry it alone. But I am prayerful this book will both comfort and help you.

Over the past 25 years, we at GriefShare have talked with thousands of people who have walked the path of grief, along with grief recovery experts. They have so much wisdom and guidance to pass along to you. And having support from people who *understand what it's like to live with loss* is invaluable.

I invite you to draw on GriefShare's videos, articles, and other resources. I especially encourage you to attend a GriefShare support group (in person or online). See griefshare.org. Many say it was one of the best decisions they made in their grief.

I'd also like to thank GriefShare writer Mike Leake and editor Kathy Leonard for the care and heart they poured into this book.

Please know that we are praying for you. We pray that you will find comfort, practical help, a measure of peace, and a renewed sense of hope for the days ahead as you journey through grief.

Prayerfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Samuel J. Hodges IV', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Samuel J. Hodges IV
President, GriefShare

Sample

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Introduction

When your child dies, your world fractures. It affects not only your emotions, but also your heart, your mind, your sleep, your faith, your very breath. Everything you counted on feels altered or absent.

There's no way to put those pieces back together in their original state. No going back to how things were. So, how do you go on?

In looking at the shattered pieces of your life, you may find some encouragement by considering the ancient Japanese art form called *kintsugi*. It can give you a hopeful picture in the midst of your ache. *Kintsugi* is the craft of mending broken pottery with gold. When a ceramic bowl shatters, the artists gather every broken piece, mix powdered gold into lacquer, and begin the slow work of repair.

The artists don't pretend the damage didn't happen. They don't try to make it look new again. They honor the break.

Don't misunderstand. This isn't about becoming "beautifully broken," as if somehow you are better after this loss. It's about learning how to live with what is broken. To make those shattered edges part of your continuing story.

What you'll find in this book

This book is structured in three parts. The first section helps you know what is common among those who have also experienced the loss of a child—the emotions, questions, struggles—and what can help you.

And, since grief is never one-size-fits-all, the middle section of this book allows you to trace a path that fits your story, addressing grief challenges specific to your child's age, the circumstances of the death, and your family situation.

The final section is filled with practical help, such as how to handle grief ambushes, what to do with your child's belongings, and how to honor their memory.

Throughout the book you'll find prayers in the "Giving God your broken pieces" sections. When you don't have the words to pray, these can help you express your grief to the One who mends broken hearts.

Also look for the "10 tips/10 truths" lists, which give you actionable ideas for parenting grieving children, dealing with your and your spouse's different grieving styles, handling relationships with extended family, and figuring out who you are now.

In *Life After the Loss of Your Child*, you'll discover that the disorienting, consuming nature of grief is normal and you are not alone in what you're experiencing. Our hope is that you'll be encouraged by the stories and guidance from others who've walked this path before you, or are walking it now. And we pray that this book points you toward a story where all the broken things of this world are ultimately put back together.

Shattered

Your emotions are not your enemy. They are part of how love responds to loss. Your emotions are proof that something precious mattered.

“The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”

Psalm 34:18

Sample

CHAPTER 1

When your world stops

Shattered. Numb. Empty. Broken. Devastated. Hollow. Crushed. Blindsided. Living a nightmare.

After the death of your child, you likely find yourself grasping for words. Nothing is sufficient to describe the moment when your world stopped. Holly shares,

I could not breathe or speak. I wanted to crawl into a dark hole and make it go away. The trauma of that moment has haunted me and caused anxiety.

Perhaps you can identify with Hollis, whose 30-year-old son died of a heart condition:

I hung up that phone, walked into the bathroom, and I collapsed on the floor. I was in a storm of emotions that was so severe I didn't think I was going to be able to make it through.

One parent says it was “the worst pain I’ve ever experienced.”

Whether you sat in stunned silence or fell to the ground with a flood of emotion, one thing is true—this moment has indelibly shaped you.

This loss is unexplainable

Some of life's losses are easier to understand than others. Yes, it's heartbreaking when a grandmother dies in her 90s, but it's understandable. The death of a child, though, dashes every expectation. It's not the order life is supposed to follow.

There are no words large enough, no explanations that make sense. Time stalls, language fails, and everything you thought you knew about life feels shattered.

In those first moments, everything freezes. You may remember the sound of sirens, the phone ringing, or a knock at the door. Or it may all be a blur. The world kept going, but you didn't. Many parents are caught between disbelief and a strange, hollow "knowing."

Somehow you moved through the hours that came next. Phoebe shares:

When it first happened I was like a zombie, just walking around like, *What do I do?* because I didn't have a clue. I was in shock and just did things automatically. You know how you can unthinkingly get a cup of coffee? I'd do that with everything because my mind was somewhere else.

Maybe you've been mindlessly making decisions, answering questions, and nodding to people's faces. But inside, time hasn't restarted. You're standing in ruins, split asunder. This shock and mental fog is common after the loss of a child—if this is happening to you, you're not alone.

This moment becomes a dividing line in your story

The day your child died has become a dividing line in your story. You will always know what came before, and what came after. Over time, the sharp edges soften, but that line remains.

Jeffrey and Wendy went to the hospital with the expectation of bringing their little boy home. But they never brought him home. Walking past the nursery was especially difficult. Jeffrey shares:

We had everything ready. The doctors had told us beforehand that it was a boy, so [his room] was decorated and prepared. When we came home from the hospital, I would walk by and see everything still there. I kept wondering, *Did she already have the baby and he's really not coming? Is this just a dream? Or did this really happen?*

It's normal to feel like you're living in a false reality when everything has just changed. You've crossed a dividing line between life before the loss and life after it. Your mind and heart may struggle to accept that this death is permanent, because once that reality settles in, the sadness can feel overwhelming. Wendy explains:

I don't think I've ever been just that devastatingly sad. I was just sad. Sad to the point where I thought this was something that wasn't going away. It wasn't like our oldest daughter had fallen off the swing set and broken her arm and it was gonna get better next week. I felt like this was never going to get any better.

Thankfully, over time Wendy was pulled out of such intense sadness. She and Jeffrey still have sad days, and she says, "I think those will always be there on occasion, but it's not what we're characterized by."

After losing her son Connor, Nan recalls a difficult conversation with a friend who had also lost a child. The friend said: "You're not always going to feel like this. ... It will not get better, but it will get different and you will learn to carry it."

Nan admits that these words threw her at first. She shares, "I was mad. I was frustrated. I mean, how could the loss of my precious Connor get different? I thought it would be intensely painful for the rest of my life."

But now, many years later, she acknowledges that her friend was right:

It is not as intense as the beginning. The beginning is so hard. Then you learn to carry it. You learn there are other people out there surviving it, and you cling to those people. And one day you look up and you're 12 years down the road. At the beginning, you don't think you can survive this. Then here you are.

Giving God your broken pieces

Whether you're just beginning your grief journey or you've been on this road awhile, pray that God will help you through this book:

*God, as I begin this book, please meet me here.
I pray that this becomes a means to my healing.
Use these pages in whatever way You see fit.
Give patience for the process of healing, honesty
about where I'm at, and the assurance that
You are with me every step of the way, even
when progress feels slow.*

CHAPTER 2

Dealing with your emotions

These words from other grieving parents may echo what you're feeling. They may also give voice to emotions you haven't yet been able to name. Which of these can you relate to:

- “I felt deep, deep sadness—crying that took my breath away.”
- “I was angry and frustrated.”
- “Panic and anxiety.”
- “I wanted someone or something to blame.”
- “Heart-shattering despair, waves and waves of guilt, feeling lost, emptiness.”
- “Unfathomable heartbreak, unimaginable pain. I thought my heart would literally, physically break.”

And as your emotions surface, you may notice they don't wait for permission. They come without warning—sometimes all at once!—and leave you feeling as though everything is out of your control and you're losing your mind. That was Vicki's experience:

I thought I was going crazy. There were so many emotions going on. I'd walk down the grocery store aisles and see the cups of pineapple I used to send to my daughter in care packages—and [I'd] break down crying.

It's common to experience emotions that catch you off guard. That also happened to Edna at the DMV office:

I went to get a driver's license and thought I was okay. She asked if I'd like to be a donor, and it hit me. Since they'd rejected my daughter as an organ donor, I didn't want them to have mine if our daughter's wasn't good enough for them. I cry so hard in the most embarrassing times.

Others, like author Dr. Jerry Sittser, talk about how disorienting grief can feel at any given time:

The world was spinning. I could be as close to somebody as eight feet away, and it seemed like they were in another galaxy.

Emotions can be strange companions. They can be guides or tormentors. They remind us that we're still alive, yet they can make life feel unbearable. This might lead you to wonder: *Why did God give us emotions at all?*

Why did God give us emotions, anyway?

Counselor Dr. Paul Tautges gives a helpful answer:

Loss in any form brings sadness, a normal and healthy response. God created us with emotions. This is part of how He made us to respond to loss in our lives.

The depth of sadness, and how long it lasts, is connected to how significant the loss is, and whether or not there

is hope for recovering fully from it. But when that sadness turns in the wrong direction, that is when it becomes harmful.

Dr. Tautges's words remind us that emotions are not accidents of biology. They are part of God's creative design. You were created to feel. Your tears, your anger, your fear, and even your numbness are signals that something precious has been lost. They are part of how God helps you respond to what your mind cannot yet fully grasp.

Sadness, for example, isn't a malfunction. It is one of the ways we rightly respond to life in a broken world. But some of these emotions can be uncomfortable or confuse us. They shift quickly and do not always behave as we expect. And our culture, or our beliefs about God, can reinforce certain ideas about what we *should* be feeling. Counselor David Bueno Martin says it well:

I think some theology says you're supposed to "have it all together." That God somehow loves you more if you are in a certain emotional state—and that is not what the Bible teaches.

God gave you emotions for a reason. Emotions were given to help you understand yourself and relate to God and to others.

But what if you feel "nothing"?

Shock: The emergency response of love

In the first hours or days after your child's death, you might find yourself in a kind of emotional fog. The world keeps moving, but you can't seem to catch up. You watch yourself doing the next thing, but it's like you're watching someone else's life. Sherry describes it this way:

I was in disbelief for weeks. I knew it was true, but it took a long time for my mind to accept that it had really happened.

How could my beautiful daughter die alone on a highway at 19? Everything felt impossible. Even breathing was hard.

Many grieving parents describe that same dazed stillness. What you are experiencing is the mercy of shock. The fact that you're not experiencing intense emotions right now is not a lack of love. It's your body and soul protecting you from pain too heavy to face all at once. We might think of shock as love's emergency response to love. Vicki shares:

There was a period of numbness. I was just going through the motions, and I really didn't understand why.

The stillness is part of the process. But numbness can last longer than is helpful. Sometimes without realizing it, we start to resist feeling again. That's when numbness stops being a mercy and starts becoming a wall. Bueno Martin explains:

It's interesting because when we try to numb [painful] emotions, what happens is we numb all emotions. We can't selectively numb certain emotions. If I numb my anxiety and my anger and my sadness, I am also numbing my joy, my love, my connection.

When we try to push pain down, we push joy and healing down too. The same walls that keep sorrow out can keep comfort out as well.

If you find yourself stuck in numbness, be gentle with yourself. It can feel scary to even consider letting any emotions out and feeling them. You don't need to force emotions to return, but you can slowly begin to invite them. Sit with someone you trust. Pray, or just breathe. Ask God to hold you in the silence until your heart begins to wake again.

Anger: The protest of love

One of the first emotions that comes after shock is often the heat of anger. Anger is triggered in situations that you feel are unjust or unfair—that

don't line up with how you think the world should operate. The loss of your child, unsurprisingly, is ripe for this emotion.

You might feel a rush of frustration or outrage at what happened, and this can be startling. Many people are taught to think of anger as always being wrong. But in grief, anger is often love's protest. It rises up because something precious has been lost. The reality is—we *shouldn't* be in a world where death occurs. So anger can be a helpful, healthy response to loss.

The problems come when we start looking to place blame, based on our own judgments about a person or situation. That blame may have a very intentional target, or it may point in a few directions at once. You may find yourself angry at the circumstances, yourself, others, God, or even the child you lost. And when that anger is misdirected and it begins to harm people, relationships, or property, it becomes unhelpful and unhealthy.

For some people, anger will explode, and for others, it will fester. Your anger may erupt in rage—or turn inward in the form of resentment. Dr. Tautges explains what happens when anger turned inward is left unaddressed:

When we hold on to anger, it becomes resentment, and then it can grow into bitterness. Bitterness is really a self-made prison. We might feel justified in holding on to it, but in the end we're only hurting ourselves. It's like drinking poison and expecting someone else to suffer.

Healthy anger, on the other hand, leads us to grieve what is wrong and bring it to God. Anger that is attended to in this way can be used constructively. It can alert us to the world being different than it should be. How do you channel anger in an appropriate way? Pastor Thabiti Anyabwile offers this counsel:

We should feel it. We shouldn't necessarily try to tamp it down and ignore it. We should express it in a healthy way. We can do that through prayer or in the pursuit of justice. You could get involved in a cause of some sort that allows you to express that righteous indignation in a constructive, positive way. Ultimately that's what we want to do with our anger: *We want to channel it into something constructive and positive.*

When your anger surfaces, it's helpful to ask yourself what it's trying to show you. Bueno Martin reminds us that emotions can assist us: "My emotions can be a guide for what's going on in me, and God is using them to take me to a different place."

Does your anger point you to something that feels unfair? Bring it to God and ask for His help in finding ways to use it constructively. Does your anger point to guilt that still needs grace? If you realize your anger has been harmful and unhealthy, bring it honestly to God. When anger is released to God, you can begin to heal. Anger is the voice of love protesting that wrongs be made right—and trusting God to do what we cannot.

Fear: The protection of love

For some, anger gives way to another emotion: fear. Fear of the future, of more loss, of not being able to survive what has already happened. Fear can be one of God's good gifts. He gave us fear to help us recognize danger, respond to threat, and protect what we love. Fear is healthy when it alerts you to what matters and moves you to act wisely.

After loss, and especially the loss of a child, you learn in a staggering way that tragedy is possible. That keeps you watchful for what might go wrong next. You want to make sure that nothing like this ever happens again. Nan shares:

I didn't have a whole lot of fears and worries before. But after my son passed away, I knew, *Wow, this can happen, just like that, to anybody.* I'd seen it happen to other people, but

when it happens to you, it's a totally different story. The fears are that it could happen to one of my other children. Now my eyes are opened. Life is hard, and things happen.

These fears can leave you feeling uneasy leaving home or unsettled when loved ones are late. That's because fears can easily turn into anxiety. And there is a difference between fear and anxiety.

- **Fear:** A signal that warns and protects and responds to what is perceived as real.¹
- **Anxiety:** A fear that cannot rest and is driven by “what ifs.”

Both often begin in love, but anxiety grows when love feels unsafe in the world and forgets that God is near. Anxiety tries to carry what only God can hold.

For some parents, the shift from fear to anxiety happens quietly. For others, it rushes in like a flood. After his daughter's death, author Dr. Walter Strickland found himself with excessive worry that this type of tragic loss could happen again and again:

I began to worry about anything and everything. It became so debilitating that it was hard to actually enjoy the good gifts of God.

That's what anxiety does. It shrinks the world until your attention narrows to evidences of threat and even good things start to feel unsafe. You find yourself scanning for danger, rehearsing possible disastrous outcomes, and holding your breath even in ordinary moments. Where you once loved freely, you now guard everything, trying to keep further loss at bay. Counselor Dr. Elias Moitinho describes it like this:

1 In the Bible you will see the phrase “Fear not”; this is not necessarily the same type of fear we are referring to here. In most cases, the phrase is being used to comfort the listener and assure them there is nothing to be afraid of.

Worry creates stories in our minds: what-if scenarios that usually imagine the worst. Worry is [often] more imaginary, more negative [than reality] and detrimental to your health.

What helped Dr. Strickland was remembering that life is both *fragile* and *good*. He was reminded that the Bible says there is “a time to mourn and a time to dance” (Ecclesiastes 3). And sometimes both happen in the same hour. Holding those truths won’t erase the emotion of fear, but it can help you keep from fixating on the awful things that *may* happen.

The antidote to anxiety is trust. Trust is when fear learns where to rest. Jesus spoke directly to this in Matthew 6 when He said, “Do not worry about tomorrow.” He wasn’t scolding anxious people, but rather reminding them of the truth: “Your Father knows what you need.” Dr. Tautges points us in the right direction for help:

We can respond to our worries by turning them over to the Lord in prayer, recognizing what we are responsible for and what we are not. Act on what you can; release what you can’t.

Trust doesn’t mean you’ll never feel afraid again, it just means you aren’t trying to face that fear alone.

Learning to live with every emotion

Grief rarely comes in a straight line. Don’t be surprised to experience a range of emotions on the same day—or within the same hour. Even after weeks and months, emotions you thought had stilled might return in full force. You may cycle through sadness, anger, fear, and other emotions many times. Dr. Tautges describes it this way:

Grief is like waves coming up onto the beach. You never know when that wave is coming and you don’t know how

long it's going to stay on the shore. But it comes, and then you let the wave do the work for which it was sent.

Emotions are indicators that reveal what you love, what you trust in, what you believe, and what you long for. They point you somewhere. They are like a dashboard, pointing you toward something deeper. Learning to live with every emotion means developing a curiosity with them. Rather than embracing some and rejecting others, bring your feelings to God. In doing this, they become teachers instead of tormenters. Dr. Jerry Sittser, who lost his daughter, wife, and mother in a car accident, hints at this when he says:

I came to the point of recognizing there was no choice in the matter: I couldn't turn my emotions off. I had to make peace with the fact that tears were going to be with me for the rest of my life. And that is not a bad thing. In fact, it's a sign of health. We're emotional people. It's how we've been made.

You may never stop feeling deeply, but deep feeling isn't the enemy. Your tears, your anger, your fear, and even times of numbness tell of what you've loved and lost. They don't need to be erased, just channeled.

Over time, grief changes shape. The pain doesn't vanish, but it becomes more woven into the story of who you are. The same emotion that once felt unbearable begins to lose its jagged edges, and broken pieces begin to mend. For now, it's enough to breathe, weep when you need to, rejoice when you can, and trust that God is still meeting you in whatever you might be feeling.

Your emotions are not your enemy. They are part of how love responds to loss. Your emotions may be uncomfortable at times or flat-out overwhelm you. And sometimes they can even make you feel ashamed, or make you feel like God will be absent until you get your feelings under control. Your emotions are proof that something precious mattered. And God can meet you through the very feelings you wish would go away.

Giving God your broken pieces

If you're overwhelmed by emotions you can't control or explain, praying something like this may be helpful:

God, I don't know what to do with what I'm feeling right now.

Sometimes I don't even know what I'm feeling.

Help me to bring every emotion to You.

Give me the eyes to see what You're showing me through these emotions.

And help me to be anchored in You, no matter what I'm feeling.

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