

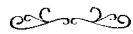


Preface

THIS BOOK IS for two readers: bereaved mothers and those mothers' family and friends. Part 1 presents a practical, gentle survival manual for moms who have lost a son or daughter of any age by any means. The format of short sections with sub-headings allows you to pick the issue that is most pressing for you today. Each topic includes "Messages for Moms," which list specific suggestions to help guide you in coping with this horrific tragedy. Turn to these sections as often as necessary, since different words may be helpful at different times. While some parts of this guide may also be useful to your husband or adult children, it was written for you, the mother. I've created various metaphors and images throughout the book to help in your healing. Research findings support many of the statements, as indicated in the references.

Part 2 is written for friends and family or anyone else who wants to help a grieving mother. Please consider giving this last section to your friends and family as early as possible. While others will not be able to begin to understand your loss, they *can* be guided in how best to support you.

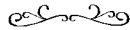
My heart is with you as you travel this painful journey and move toward healing and peace.



Part 1: A Survival Guide for Mothers

Gentle Suggestions and Messages for Bereaved Moms

C H A P T E R 1



The Unimaginable

Initial Shock

THE LOSS OF your child hits like a speeding locomotive, crushing your body and mind as well as your heart. Some mothers see the train coming and try to brace themselves; others get hit from behind without warning. Either way, such catastrophic loss is unthinkable, unimaginable, and unbelievable. We can account for the sequence of events and explain all that happened yet still feel as if we are in some kind of surreal nightmare. Like wounded gazelles, we initially function with a partial anesthesia of shock and disbelief, all the while still racked with the pain of loss. We move through the necessary motions of our days without remembering the details, but we always do so with a constant preoccupation with the precious image of our children. This numbness is common in bereavement, and will lessen slowly over the months to come (Wing, Clance, Burge-Callaway & Armistead, 2001).

The catastrophic loss of a child is often incapacitating. In the immediate months, imagine yourself in an intensive care unit. If you were physically injured, you would only expect yourself to breathe and would slowly allow your body to heal. Try to give yourself the same permission now. Although your

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wounds are invisible, they are no less real. Drastically lower your expectations of yourself; give yourself a chance to simply comprehend this loss. If you can sit upright and take fluids and appropriately respond to others for the first few months, you are doing well!

I expected far too much of myself in the first few weeks following the loss of my own daughter, Melissa. Like the victim of a land mine who has not yet realized she has lost her legs, I was unaware of how difficult every movement would be in the initial weeks. I needed permission to do nothing, help with setting realistic expectations, and protection from overextending myself. No one could advise me, because our wounds are invisible to those who love us, since those around us are also injured and debilitated.

The age of the child at his or her time of death is irrelevant to a mother. (The word *child* in this book refers to your daughter or son at whatever age and developmental stage of life or adulthood he or she lived to reach.) A child of five minutes or fifty years is still your child and is still just as precious and irreplaceable. The more years with the child you were able to spend, the more haunted with all the memories and experiences you will be; the fewer years you spent with the child, the more cheated you will feel by the loss of the future happiness that was promised to you. Thus, *every* mother feels permanently bonded to her child and violently stripped of his or her future, regardless of the child's age. Whatever the circumstances, you are experiencing a catastrophic loss that will catapult you into a painful journey unlike any other experience you've ever had.

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Each mother will have her own unique journey of grief and her own instinctive ways of healing. There are no rights or wrongs, no one way to experience loss or to heal. Honoring your *own* experiences and your *own* instincts is critical to your well-being. Use this guide in ways that may be helpful to you; ignore any content that does not apply to you. We all have different ways of healing (Pope, 2007; Thompson et al., 2011).

MESSAGES FOR MOMS: INITIAL SHOCK

- ☞ **Avoid comparing yourself to anyone else. This is your journey to survive in whatever ways feel right for you.**
- ☞ **Trust your instincts. Your inner voice will guide you with each step that is right for you.**

Rhythms of Grief

We usually experience our mourning in waves, not stages. We feel a mixture of intense emotions that tumble and fall together; different feelings will surface at different times, but they will often be intertwined. We may not detect any change in the intensity of the pain for many months or even until the second year after our loss. Initially, our lives will feel like an endless monsoon: a downpour of anger, longing, anxiety, and heartache. The thunderstorm of grief will overcome us with drowning rain for long periods of time before lessening a bit before the next wave of rainfall. As we slowly heal, the periods of clearing will become more frequent and longer, the downpours a bit less intense and shorter. In this way, our grieving will cycle

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like stormy weather for the years to come, gradually easing into more cycles of sunshine between more gentle rainfalls. Over time, the freedom to think about something else will become easier and more frequent. Expect the downpours to keep coming, but know that they will eventually be less fierce than they are today. You will heal, but the progress may be too subtle for you to detect at any one time. Below are a few suggestions for coping with these waves.

MESSAGES FOR MOMS: RHYTHMS OF GRIEF

- ☞ Every downpour is eventually followed by a time of clearing. Accept the times of being overcome by grief, knowing that you will feel better again eventually.**
- ☞ Focus on the spots of sunshine as they eventually break through to you. Savor the moments when you feel life is more “normal,” which will come eventually.**
- ☞ Have patience with yourself during the thunderstorms of grief, allowing yourself the time and space to heal. Your distress expresses your immeasurable love for your child! Every tear honors this precious person whom you brought into your life.**

The Pain of Loss

The longing to see, hear, feel, and hold our children is excruciatingly intense and initially unrelenting: this is the pain of

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maternal grief. Such agonizing yearning is a result of our love for our children as well as our devotion to them. Our grief honors our children as a precious entity in this world, without whom the world would never be the same. As the months go by, we also grow to express our love in other ways. Initially, crying may be the only thing we can do.

We are organically wired to identify pain as negative: an indication that something is wrong with us. The intensity of this painful yearning can be terrifying to us. We find ourselves thrust into frightening and uncharted waters. Try to remember that every other mother who has lost a child has also traveled through this pain and has survived. You will, too.

Grief pain is an automatic and natural process; it is an outcome of your innate bond with the child whom you nurtured. An athlete in training experiences muscle aches as she builds her strength; a woman in labor experiences pain as her body works to open the birth canal. Both examples illustrate appropriate pain: hurt that is also part of a natural process. Your grief pain also works in a beneficial way, this time to widen your heart. As you allow yourself to process your loss and experience the emotional pain, your empathy for others will multiply without you even being aware of it. In birthing labor, the more the woman relaxes and works with the pain, the faster the work progresses. In grieving, accept this painful yearning as an inevitable part of the process that will aid your healing—and perhaps even your growth—in personal strength and compassion. Avoid the urge to fight the pain or bury the pain. Relax into the pain, and release it by expressing your agony in any way you can. Here are

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a few suggestions for releasing some of the pain you are experiencing.

MESSAGES FOR MOMS: THE PAIN OF LOSS

- ☞ We must cry, both often and hard. Tears let out the pain and make room for healing. Some moms find that being alone and out of earshot helps to make them feel free to really let out the pain with sobs or even screams. Give yourself permission to cry or grieve in any way your heart tells you to do as often as you want to do so. Although feeling the intensity of your grief will be excruciating, you will experience an easing of your suffering once the crying is over.**
- ☞ Process your feelings aloud with understanding souls. Find at least two or three people who can listen to your grief. As you cope with an unfamiliar level of distress, being able to think aloud with supportive people can be extremely helpful. Most mothers need to talk about their grief with someone, and they heal better when they process their feelings out loud with an understanding heart (Arnold & Gemma, 2008; Harper, O'Connor & O'Carrol, 2014).**
- ☞ Consider looking beyond your immediate friends to other sources of support, such as parent-bereavement groups, social workers, members of the clergy, therapists, or other professionals affiliated with hospice or grief-support networks. The more people who support you, the more effectively your needs**

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will be met. Every bereaved mother *deserves* as much support as possible.

- ☞ If you know of another mom who has lost a child, consider talking to her. Although this is a vulnerable time for you when it will be more difficult to interact with new people, the right empathy from someone who has also lost a child can be incredibly helpful. Mothers who find this type of social support often experience fewer grief symptoms (Lepore, Silver, Wortman & Wayment, 1996).
- ☞ Consider contacting a mother from a bereaved-parent group or attending a meeting of such a group. A list of resources is included in the end of this book. Several studies have found that bereaved mothers reported receiving the most comfort from other mothers who have lost a child (Bouckaert, 2000; Cacciatore & Bushfield, 2007; Hunt & Greeff, 2011-2012; Nikkola, Kaunonen & Aho, 2013).
- ☞ Try to record, blog, journal, or express your pain in any way that feels right to you. Writing, drawing, or verbalizing your feelings will often help you to release them and to think about other positive things. Other bereaved parents recommend talking about your pain in e-mails, websites, or blogs (Thompson et al., 2011).
- ☞ Avoid falling into the habit of turning to alcohol or other substances to numb the pain. Seek professional help right away if you are tempted in this

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area. If you are experiencing distressing insomnia, anxiety, or depression, consult your doctor as soon as possible.

- ☞ **Internet or online support groups for bereaved parents have been helpful to some mothers, especially if no local support groups are available. Parents have reported the benefits of round-the-clock access for emotional support and the safety to talk about taboo subjects, thus making it easier to share their feelings or experiences (Elder & Burke, 2015; Feigelman, Gorman, Beal & Jordan, 2008).**

Common Physical Reactions

Mothers often experience physical symptoms with their loss that are both very real and very normal. Catastrophic loss is traumatic not only to our hearts but also to our bodies and minds. Mothers most commonly experience insomnia and anxiety similar to posttraumatic shock reactions. Our minds work so hard at trying to comprehend this unimaginable loss that it makes sleeping difficult (Buckley et al., 2012; Miles, 1985; Murphy, Johnson & Lohan, 2003; Utz, Caserta & Lund, 2011).

We may feel anxious without knowing why. The floor of our lives has collapsed beneath us: we assumed that our child would outlive us, and that core belief is now shattered. We automatically move into a kind of hyperalert phase in which we unconsciously brace ourselves for another surprise attack. In the months following our loss, for example, my husband and I used to find each other in the kitchen in the middle of

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the night; at other times, we would look into our daughter's room and unconsciously expect her to be there. All this is normal, albeit stressful and painful. Your brain is simply struggling to comprehend the unthinkable.

Many mothers experience common physical symptoms of stress: loss of appetite or food cravings, back pain or headaches, and hormonal changes that result in an erratic menstrual cycle or hot flashes. Some mothers feel shortness of breath, a tightness in the throat, or a heaviness in the chest; some may occasionally be nauseous or gripped with fear (Bonanno & Kaltman, 2001; Kowalski & Bondmass, 2008; Stroebe, Schut & Stroebe, 2007; Wing et al., 2001).

Any physical discomfort can be related to your intense sorrow; our bodies and minds are interwoven and inseparable. The extreme stress of grief places us more at risk for colds or common infections and even accidents because we are so distracted. Our bodies are simply run-down from the enormous stress of loss (Buckley et al., 2012; Spratt & Denny, 1991).

Fatigue accompanies almost all loss and stays much longer than anticipated (Hunt & Greeff, 2011-2012; Stroebe et al., 2007). Your body and mind channel all your energy into processing this terrible loss. Just as a broken bone needs a cast or brace to heal, your body and mind need rest to recover physically and cognitively from this trauma. Some moms find that they need naps or perhaps a "rest day" at least weekly. In the weeks following the loss of my daughter, friends would call up and offer a supportive invitation to go for a walk with them. My feet felt like lead, and my usual pace was absolutely impossible. I did not have the energy for my usual activities the first few months. Chores piled up around

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me, since even the smallest effort seemed too much. One normally athletic mom said she could not walk to the end of the driveway to retrieve the mail; another mom needed months before she could return to her employment. (Both bereaved mothers referenced here were people I know, as are other examples in this book). Such physical fatigue is common and is to be expected.

MESSAGES FOR MOMS: COMMON PHYSICAL REACTIONS

- ☞ Be patient with yourself. Try to accept whatever reaction your body has as part of your own healing journey. Many of these reactions are common to mothers who have lost a child.**
- ☞ Listen to your body's cues. Give yourself the same permission to rest as if you had the flu. Your fatigue is real. You will return to a more normal functioning, but it may take months.**
- ☞ Get help wherever you can. Ask close friends or family members for a hand, or hire a cleaning service for a few months and use take-out food services to lower the demands on you. Research shows that bereaved parents encourage one another to rely on outside help and advise one another to accept all offers from friends and neighbors (Thompson et al., 2011).**
- ☞ Try to maintain your nutrition and normal self-care activities as much as you can. Avoid alcohol or unnecessary medications.**

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- ☞ **Try to sleep seven to eight hours a day, even if it is broken sleep. A sleep medication may be helpful in the short term to allow you to keep functioning; such medications are best taken under the guidance of your physician or nurse practitioner.**
- ☞ **Lessen the demands and obligations on you as much as possible. Exterior stress compounds all grief symptoms. If you are employed outside the home, take off as much time as possible that feels right to you. Research has suggested that having time to heal without having to deal with the demands of work can be very helpful to bereaved mothers (Sundell, 1998).**
- ☞ **For all physical symptoms, seek medical attention for any significant changes or any reactions that may indicate illness. The extreme stress of grief can result in real pathology, so no symptom should be dismissed.**

Common Cognitive Reactions

Preoccupation with our lost loved one is the hallmark of all grief. Often a person in grief will fear that she is going crazy because her mind is so distracted and distressed. As our brains work harder and harder to process this loss, our mental acuity for other areas will be automatically lessened. Because our ability to concentrate becomes compromised, we forget why we walked into a room. We do not remember conversations we had or things we did. We lose track of important dates.

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We misplace things more easily. One mom got so tired of losing her keys that she finally put them on a lanyard around her neck—a great example of just accepting the new reality of her life and making helpful adjustments. Distraction and inability to concentrate is normal and unavoidable, as many research studies have shown (Bonanno & Kaltman, 2001; Stroebe et al., 2007; Toblin et al., 2012; Utz et al., 2011).

MESSAGES FOR MOMS: COMMON COGNITIVE REACTIONS

- ☞ **Try to accept that lack of focus is a normal reaction to loss that no one can control. You will regain your ability to think clearly, but it will take months and will return slowly.**
- ☞ **Make lists, write things down, and stick to routine places for important things. Give yourself credit for accomplishing any cognitive task in the months following a catastrophic loss. Most people can only halfway function in a fog of automatic actions; this automation allows their brains to concentrate their energy on the necessary healing.**
- ☞ **When your mind refuses to stay focused on the task at hand, give in to your memories of your child. Often when we take time to remember, honor, and painfully process the loss, we slowly gain longer periods when we are able to focus on something else.**
- ☞ **Lower your expectations of yourself. Give yourself credit for breathing and getting out of bed every**

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day. If you are drinking healthy fluids, responding to others, making appropriate decisions, and wearing matching shoes, you are coping extremely well, no matter how much you cry or sleep!

- ☞ **Look at what you *are* doing in the aftermath of catastrophic loss, rather than what you are unable to do right now. Each little action takes great effort, since your body and mind are struggling to heal from this trauma. You are carrying around a huge boulder of grief in addition to the weight of your daily routine. No one can go back to functioning at the same level we were previously until the weight of that grief lessens, which takes more time than we want to give. Just like healing a bone, healing from grief cannot be hurried. You have to accept the limits of the “cast” and allow your body and mind to heal in their own time.**

Hunger and Yearning for Your Child

The intense longing for your child causes difficult emotional pain and unremitting agony. Our bodies and minds cry out deep from our core to see, hear, touch, smell, and feel our children. Although there is no way to satisfy these needs, bereaved mothers find many ways to stay connected to their lost children and recommend doing so to other bereaved mothers. Parents report a lessening of the intensity of their grief when they remain connected to their children and continue bonding practices for many years—usually their entire lifetime. For the bereaved parent, the goal of grief is not to cut

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your bond with your child, but to integrate your child as a spiritual presence in your life in a new way (Arnold & Gemma, 2008; Barrera et al., 2009; Klass, 1997; Thompson et al., 2011).

For many parents, their child has left this world to enter another world. Thus, their child still lives and continues to exist, but in a spiritual realm. For the purposes of this book, I refer to your child's physical death or earthly death, in order to make a distinction between their earthly life and their afterlife. Thus, at times I refer to your children in present tense, since their spirits still continue.

Here are a few ideas from other mothers who have survived this journey. When you are ready, some of these may bring you comfort.

MESSAGES FOR MOMS: HUNGER AND YEARNING

- ☞ Consider putting clothes worn by your child that still hold his or her body scent in a plastic bag to preserve the scent. I used to bury my head in a sweater my daughter had recently worn and would just breathe in the smell of her whenever I longed for her.**
- ☞ Consider keeping some of your child's belongings near you. I use my daughter's key chain, for example, and wear several of her jackets. For adult children, ask their spouses for some of these belongings.**
- ☞ I found looking at photos was one way that I could stop crying, although some parents cannot look at photos at all in the beginning. If and when pictures do comfort**

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you, collect all the photos you can from others as well. Display and organize them in ways that will allow you to soak them up frequently and easily and as often as you desire.

- ☞ Consider listening to audio and video recordings of your child. Put these recordings in formats and electronic devices that you can easily access and absorb. Some moms have the last voice-mail messages from their children on their phones, which they play back frequently.**
- ☞ If it comforts you, soak up your child's handwriting or artwork or other creations. I found my daughter's prayer journal in her drawer, and I copied her handwriting in order to make copies of quotes for her friends. I found tracing her letters and seeing how she formed words very soothing.**
- ☞ Consider spending time in your children's space: their rooms, their offices or homes, their cars. Being where they spent time is another way of feeling closer. Visiting meaningful locations is a common way of continuing the bond for bereaved parents.**
- ☞ Perhaps write down the happy memories as they come to you, or narrate your voice over a PowerPoint with photos once you have the energy to do so. Capturing the happy moments by reviewing them in your memory in any way possible keeps them close to your heart. Journaling in any form is also therapeutic.**

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- ☞ **Parents often establish rituals or habits that remind them of their children and help them feel connected, such as continuing an activity they did together or an activity that they loved (Norton & Francesca, 2014).**
- ☞ **Create an Internet memorial or a Facebook page.**
- ☞ **Give yourself permission to comfort your longing in any way that works for you for as long as you need to do so. Ignore the voices in your head or your family members or friends who push you to “move on.” By allowing yourself to process your grief, you *are* moving on and healing, even if no one else understands. Bereaved parents continue the bond with their children by remembering, loving, and caring and often recommend that other bereaved parents try to do the same (Arnold & Gemma, 2008).**

How Do I Go On?

No mother wants to think about life without her child. The longing to see our son or daughter again is far more intense than anyone can anticipate, the agony more excruciating. We know we will not see, touch, or hear our child’s physical presence again, and such a thought seems intolerable. We are in the intensive care unit wondering, “How can I endure life in this state?” We fear that the pain will never end. One mother might wish for her own death soon after her loss, while another may fear death; both are normal reactions. A logical response to wanting to be with your child is to go where she is: in this case, the afterlife. For most moms, this is *not* contemplating

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suicide but simply wanting to be somewhere else that is less painful. Avoid adding needless guilt to these normal feelings (Harper, O'Connor, Dickson & O'Carroll, 2011).

In the months following my loss, I would comfort myself with the knowledge that I might die in two or three years from some disease. Although I wanted my surviving child to be cared for well, I found comfort in thinking that I might not have too much longer to live until I would again be with my daughter in heaven. Entertaining the possibility of a shorter life not only eased my sorrow but helped me make more use of each day. As the thunderstorms of grief began to ease into alternating gentle rain and sunshine, my desire to continue with my earthly life grew stronger and my thoughts of death ceased. If you find yourself longing to be with your child, ask yourself: What do you want to do for your loved ones before you die? Who are you caring for now on this earth who needs you? Focus on giving to these loved ones who are here with you while you still can.

Although we anticipate that the years ahead of us spent without our children will be intolerable, we will heal eventually. We recover our balance in life, even though we will always be missing a piece of our lives. We do regain our ability to laugh, to be productive, to help others, and even to enjoy parts of our lives. If this is impossible for you to imagine right now, than remember that you only have today to live.

MESSAGES FOR MOMS: GOING ON

- ☞ Take one day at a time. You do not need to survive forever. Just today.**

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- œ Focus on caring for yourself and doing something for your loved ones who are around you now whenever you can. They need you more than ever.
- œ If you can, give yourself permission to take a “break” from your grief. Go to the movies or go away for a weekend, if either of those appeal to you.
- œ Your reaction to your loss is normal and unique to you. No one can predict your response or give you an exact prescription for healing. Your instincts will guide you. Trust them.

