

Parenting Solo: Once a Parent

Written by Michelle Greenlee Harris, Columnist
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When I saw this question posted online it really made me think. "If someone loses a spouse they are called a widow or widower. If a child loses their parents they are called an orphan. Why isn't there a name for a parent who loses a child?" One answer expressed my sentiments exactly. There is a name for that person – a parent. Once a child is created in your heart, there is no turning back.

Another answer to the question made sense. The reason there isn't a specific name is because losing a child is so painful it can't be described in words. I can believe that.

Some experts say the loss of a child is comparable to a major physical injury. Both require a recovery period. And both may need professional help to complete the process.

I don't really like the term, lose a child. I mean you haven't misplaced your baby. They have been ripped from your arms. It doesn't matter if it is by violence, an illness or an accident. It doesn't matter if they were taken from you before they are born -like mine, shortly after they are born -like my sister's or once they are all grown up -like one of my friend's.

Our nation has recently taken another catastrophic blow as we are forced to say good bye to the most innocent among us. The twenty children killed in the Newtown Connecticut massacre have forced all parents to stare into the eyes of our worst nightmare. Grief experts have given us suggestions on what to do if we are ever close to any parent making such a horrible journey.

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We should remind them there is no time clock on their grief. While the steps of the grieving may be similar, each person's journey will happen at a different pace. I'm a big believer that there is no finish line for grief and often times people circle back to places they have been before. The main goal of the process is to not get stuck.

Advise them to delay making major decisions for at least a year. They should consider a professional counselor to help them adjust to life without their baby. Churches or grief support groups can also provide a good sounding board.

While there is no right thing to say - many parents are offended by 'I know how you feel' (even if you have lost a child) since each parents loss is as unique as their child.

It's okay to share words of comfort including, 'I am so sorry' or 'I am here for you'. Of course if you say the latter, please make sure you mean it. Grief doesn't wear a watch and many attacks are in the midnight hour when everyone else is resting but the grieving parent. When the phone rings – answer. I have been known to send a 3am text 'I'm up if you want to talk'.

Don't be afraid of the tears. Sometimes entire conversations will consist of crying, sobbing and wailing. That is a language all its own. When my baby niece went on to heaven, my sister and I sat and wept in silence, but we were together. My pastor calls it the ministry of presence.

The death of a child brings a special kind of anguish. Their possibilities die right along with them. Don't let parents verbalize the what ifs – 'If I had just been there, If I had turned down a different street, if... if.... If'. That is torture for everyone who hears that conversation.

Remind the parent to live on – in honor of their child. Mom and Dad shouldn't be in a hurry to join their child on the other side. They will be perfectly happy in heaven until we get there.