

Steps Through Grief

by Lesley Schroeder after the passing of Mark

We lost our son Mark at the age of 17 when he drowned after a small plane crash. In the first four months of grief I remember wishing that someone would give me a list of things I could do to feel more in control, more able to keep on living. As his girlfriend, Penny said, we would all like it if there was a pill that could take grief away but there isn't. It's a slow heartbreaking process where you inch forward and then stumble backwards.

The process is different for each person but there are certain things that do help make it a little more bearable. I offer those steps and ideas here in the hope that they will be a blessing to you.

You feel you want to die: So did I for a long time. So did every bereaved mother I have ever spoken to. No matter how much you love your husband and your surviving children, you become totally obsessed with the child you lost. It's as if your entire identity and future is bound up with his. All you want to do is be with your child. He is all you think about most of the time. Feelings of wanting to die will slowly get less if you just have courage to live five minutes by five minutes. I realised that if I killed myself it would negate all that Mark and our family stood for, it would make it impossible to continue his legacy and be brave like he was. So I tried. Every day I tried and I am still here.

Put yourself first: This is the one time in your life when you should indulge yourself totally. For at least the first 6 months you should not do anything you don't want to do. No is a nice short word. Use it. Simply say no when you don't want to do something. After the first month when you are back at work and trying to cope with all your normal responsibilities at home, it is very important to have time alone. You can play music, meditate, cry, watch videos and look at photographs of your beautiful child, read. Do whatever you feel like doing. And definitely try and meditate even if it's hard going. Just do it a little every day and see how you get on.

Exercise: It's the last thing you want to do but try. Walking your pain out helps and walking on the beach in particular, is very healing. Do physical activity that you enjoy. Hiking on weekends in nature is excellent; walking around a beautiful golf course is good. Anything that gets you out of the house and into nature helps. Try joining a yoga class if you can.

Ask for help: It so often seems that it is the special children who are taken early from our world. Special children have special parents. As a special parent you are most probably the one who takes care of others and solves all the problems. Now it's your turn to accept help. People want to do things for you. Phone them up and ask. Let them show you love in practical ways when you need it most.

Journal: Keep a journal of your thoughts. You will have flashes of incredible clarity in the midst of your sadness. Write them down and date them. For at least two years you will often feel you are making little progress but if you go back to something you wrote in the first six weeks, or the first six months, you will realise just how far you have come.

Cry: Weep, sob and scream! There is a reason we have tears. When you start crying you may feel like you can't face another 10 minutes. After about 30 minutes of intense crying you will slowly feel a sense of release, a feeling of pain subsiding a little. William Frey did some interesting research where he found that tears caused by sadness contain more protein than tears caused by irritation like when you are cutting an onion and your eyes tear. According to Frey emotionally based tears contain high levels of cortisol. Cortisol is the primary hormone released during stressful situations. This suggests that we release toxins from our system when we cry and it is a good reason to let it all out.

Record your dreams: Many bereaved parents say that they begin to have very intense dreams after their child dies. You will find that your own sense of spiritual things expands enormously, no matter whether you were religious before your child died or not. You might sense things intuitively that before you wouldn't have paid attention to. You might have strange visions and vivid dreams. Write them all down. Keep a dream book and a pen next to your bed and slowly get used to waking yourself after a dream so that you can draw them or describe them in words. There is so much we can learn from dreams.

It is my personal belief that dream time is the easiest time for your child to connect with you. I ask Mark to come to me in dreams. Every night before I go to sleep I tell him that I love him and I thank him for loving me.

Be Grateful: For what? You may well ask. A spirit of gratitude helps us heal. Be grateful for the small child who curls up on your lap, the shop assistant who smiles at you, the dog that licks your hand, the friends that care, the food you eat, the stunning sunset as you drive home, your legs that work, your heart that pumps; the warmth of a hug, the young people who come and

visit. If you have other children take special time to be grateful for them. If you have a husband or wife try and make time to look at them, really look at them, hold their faces and kiss them and be grateful that you have them. In the beginning, when the only person you want is your child who has died, you often won't feel like doing this but do it anyway. Love is a decision. Decide to continue loving those who didn't die.

Touch: When we are in the worst emotional pain, touch is very important. Often people won't know how to approach you, it takes courage for them to walk up to you and talk. When they do, reach forward and hug them, or squeeze their hand and thank them. Massage is also very good. If you are a friend reading this, take your grieving friend for a good, deep massage once a week for the first few months if you can.

Reach Out to others. No is a very good word. It is important to set boundaries to be very clear about what you are able to deal with at each point of your grief journey. But this does not mean you should not reach out. A lot of people have taken the time to be kind to you, or written beautiful sympathy letters, brought food ... done so many things. Take the time to write and thank them. It will bless them and it will bless you. It will also help you to stay a more connected with your community and feel less isolated in your grief.

Reach out to your child's friends. It will hurt like hell the first time you see them all together and your child is not among them but young people have an extraordinary capacity to show their love and they want to honour their friend and care for you. So allow them to do that. Involve them in making decisions like how to celebrate your child's birthday and the anniversary of his death. If you cut yourself off from them, they will not be able to share the stories that will bring lightness to your heart, they won't tell you about their dreams and the signs they get. Open up, and let them, your child chose them because he knew they would be there for you when he left.

There will be so many milestones that will hurt. When they all pass their high school exams, your child's name will not be there but celebrate with them. Congratulate them and try to enter into their success. Then there will be all the 21st birthday parties. Make it known that you will not be hurt by attending, it will be hard for you but you would like to be invited. You do not have to lose the love and joy of all the beautiful children that have been in your life for years, the children you watched grow to adulthood.

Also reach out to other parents who lose a child, even if you do not know them. If you hear of someone in your community who loses a child, write a note, send a book or go and visit. It will mean the world to them that you came. A visit from a parent who has been bereaved for a longer time gives the mourning parent hope that they can carry on, that they do have a life beyond the death of their child. So go, reach out. I remember going to the home of Lisa, another mom from Hillcrest High who had just lost her son Jarryd in a tragic accident. I was terribly afraid of saying the wrong thing or intruding but I needn't have worried, all I had to do was hold her and listen. She appreciated it deeply and now she does the same for others. She is a very special lady.

Don't let others tell you how you should mourn: Mourning is an intensely personal process. Husbands and wives mourn differently, children mourn differently; friends mourn differently. It's okay. You have no idea how you will feel from one hour to the next so let the mourning take its course and don't judge yourself.

In the beginning I didn't want to take tranquilisers or sleeping tablets so I used wine to take the edge off my pain, to blur it so that I could look at Mark's photographs and his video and force myself to read the police reports. Now I have control over my alcohol intake but it took a long time. My point here is that any form of medication or drugs should be seen as a short term aid to coping, not a way of life.

Don't let other people criticize you for coping in your own way but do listen if they are very close to you and suggest that your behaviour is overboard if it continues after the first two years.

Generally the people who help the most are those who just listen and love and are kind. Seek them out and avoid the rest. Especially avoid friends and even some family members who urge you to start 'snapping out of your grief' – they simply have no clue.

Don't let anyone make you feel bad because you light a candle for your child every day. Don't let anyone remove your child's photograph from the middle of the Christmas dinner table because they don't want to be confronted with it. The mere fact that you got out of bed for Christmas means that you are brave and they should be applauding you! It's your home, it's your choice and it's your child so you do what works for you.

Don't let someone suggest that you are creating a shrine when you display your child's sports gear and photographs in a

corner of your lounge or create a memorial website for them. Don't let well-meaning friends tell you that you are imagining your dreams with your child or that you are delusional when you get signs. They do not understand how enormous this is and people can be that cruel. I still find it weird how people who have children themselves somehow think that we will 'get over' losing our child after a year or two. It really baffles me. For me personally, the experience of After death communication has been the most important factor in my personal recovery.

I love my friend Margaret. She has different religious beliefs to me and so she personally does not believe that Mark contacts us and talks to us in dreams. Yet I can sit for hours and tell her what I am experiencing and she never says a word in criticism. She just listens and cries and shares all her wonderful memories of Mark. I really bless her for that.

Your body will be different: Weird things will happen to your body. Your system is so run down and battered from the trauma of losing your child, especially if it was totally unexpected, that nothing about your body will feel the same for a long time. Battling to sleep, panic attacks, nausea, upset stomachs are all normal in this very abnormal time of your life. You might get fat, you might become very thin and for months you will feel disconnected from your body, as if you no longer fit it.

Try homeopathic pills for panic attacks. I found that Vitamin B injections were also very good for boosting my nervous system. Try and eat healthily and have five small meals a day if you can. Go and chat to your family doctor and ask for advice.

Your mind goes AWOL: The first thing that seems to go is your short term memory. Write every thing down so that you feel less foolish and out of control. You will forget names of people you have known for years, you will forget information that once rolled out of your head onto your tongue.

You will have bizarre, unreal thoughts. You might get an overwhelming urge to stand up and yell something crazy in a serious meeting or formal situation amongst strangers. Our minds go round and round when our child dies so maybe the mind blanks out on us so that we can cope. Be comforted, this is temporary and starts to improve around the 18th month mark.

You can't stop thinking about the way he died

Losing one of your closest mates or the child you adore is stressful enough. When the death is sudden and totally unexpected as a result of a murder or a violent accident, the trauma can be enormous. In addition to the shock of losing them, you have to deal with nightmares and images of the death scene that keep flashing through your head. Mark's brothers, his girlfriend, his friends and his dad and I all experienced horrible nightmares and continuous thoughts about Mark drowning.

What helped me was to try and replace each negative image with a positive one. I had to work hard to banish the horrible images from my mind. I would see Mark with his eyes glazed over as he drowned and I would replace that with an image of him jumping off the school bus, running over and swinging me around in his arms. I just kept doing that and slowly it worked.

I also forced myself to look at his photographs right in the first weeks of losing him. I looked at all his baby and childhood photographs and then right up to the way he was just before he died. I made enlargements of the best photographs of him and I together and put them up in my office where I could look at them. I also watched video footage of him. That broke my heart the most but I instinctively felt it was important not to block out the memories of how he was. A person's whole life is what counts, not the few moments when they were dying.

But of course it takes time to get this perspective and because none of us saw Mark die, we had to rely on witness accounts which were not consistent and made us doubt the truth of what was told to us. Not being able to see his body also made it hard to accept that Mark was really dead. It took me at least five months before I could read the eye witness accounts with feeling hysterical. As I read the words describing the last few minutes of Mark's life, I would see him in my mind and I felt like I was experiencing it; watching and able to do nothing to stop it.

I think we all experienced post traumatic stress to some extent. I watched all of us who loved Mark fall apart in different ways. I noticed how those who talked and actively worked at trying to integrate his loss into their lives and spiritual thinking seemed to cope better. But most of us still battled to separate ourselves from the way Mark died and had recurring nightmares, flashbacks, panic attacks, and terrible feelings of anxiety or jumpiness and obsessive thoughts about him. Many of us drank too much, smoked too much or took prescription or recreational drugs. Others isolated themselves from the group because they felt too numb to deal with losing Mark so they tried to block it out altogether by spending time with new friends who didn't know Mark or keeping themselves excessively busy.

Some of the friends who were close to Mark have taken as long as two years to be able to talk about their feelings openly and I realised when we all gathered for his 2nd Anniversary that there were less tears and more joy for the first time. Still, it's easy to remain stuck in grief or to stumble backwards just when you felt you were doing well.

A good therapy technique for quelling awful flashbacks to the day of the accidents is EMDR therapy (Eye movement, desensitisation and reprocessing). Ask around for a therapist that offers this. Stressors can be triggered by any sight or sound such as: the image of a body on a stretcher, the sounds of mass crying, gunshots or ambulance noise. Any of these reminders may stimulate the body's fight/flight response. The emotional impact, buried in the body memory at the moment when the news first hit, is re-experienced. EMDR helps reduce the immediate traumatic images and memory flashbacks that intrude on a bereaved person's present thoughts and action.

Making Changes: One of Mark's closest childhood friends who was leaving for college, told me that he couldn't wait to get out of Hillcrest because there was no place in our town where he didn't have a memory with Mark. He said he could no longer bear being here with Mark gone.

It's normal in the height of grief to want to pack up your life and move, to resign your job and do something completely different, to get a back pack and an air ticket and disappear, or seriously think about divorcing your husband. Just give it time. Don't make any major decisions when you are grieving. Wait a year and then act. Time gives perspective.

Memorials and Anniversaries:

Everyone should have a say in what happens when you are planning to honour your child. Teenagers often engage in high risk behaviour and do bizarre things when they lose a close friend. Ask them what they would like. Let them select the music and help decide who should speak, what the format should be. The teenagers in our community come up with some wonderfully novel ideas that I know Mark loved. They did him proud and I honour them for their friendship and care.

From the first day, I knew instinctively that Markie would not want a church funeral. Mark saw God in sunsets, in the moments of joy when he scored a try at rugby, in the stars at night and his religion was peace love and happiness - so we had his service at home. I have been to other memorial services that were held at the beach at sunrise or in a place with mountains all around. Select the kind of tribute that you know your child would like and do not allow any one to make you feel bad about your choice.

And when it comes to the first birthday after their death and the first anniversary of their death, again; ask the friends, ask your living children, ask your family what they would like to do, make the event something that suits your child's personality and interests and give the young people freedom to pay tribute in their way.

My only advice here is that you structure the event a little. Give people time to prepare. Have a programme and let people know what time you are going to light candles or release balloons so that if they don't feel up to sitting around and making small talk, they can come just for that part. A total free for all can go horribly awry. Go and stand at the place where you will hold the event and imagine the flow of people, the ambience, how it will work. Think about video and photography. It is wonderful to have those records years later.

Also, don't expect others to remember the anniversary date. Far better to send out an e-mail or phone friends to remind them of the date and ask them to come around or say special prayers for you on that day. In this way no one feels bad for forgetting the exact date and they are able to plan to visit or do something special for you on that day.

Remember your own dreams: Before your child was born, before you knew his name and his face, you had your own dreams. Recall them; act on them, live them. Try pursuing an interest you have never got around to before. Try new activities. Your child will look down at you from the soul world and praise you for never giving up; for doing all you can to make your life beautiful, for making your life count, just as his did.

You can continue to live meaningfully. You won't believe this is possible in the beginning but if you just try to get through each day with love, you will slowly find yourself becoming more integrated again, in many ways you will be a more beautiful person than before. Slowly, you will begin to incorporate the best parts of your child into yourself; you will feel his presence with you far more often and you will live his legacy. This is possible because I have a broken heart but I am still here. I live. I have been where you are and I know.

Much love and strength to each heartbroken person reading this.