



Parenting After Loss

by Sharon Vineall, LCSW, Bereavement Counselor

Grief is a painful experience, and parenting while grieving makes it even harder. How can we be present and positive for our children, in the midst of coping with our own grief? Here's what parents need to know.

TAKE GOOD CARE OF YOURSELF

The pain of grief alongside the endless demands of parenting can be overwhelming and exhausting. Taking care of yourself is essential to your emotional health and is also key to being present and positive for your kids. Although parents are accustomed to putting their own needs on the back burner, prioritizing self-care can support your ability to parent with clarity and a calm, cool head.

- Get support. Talk about your feelings and experience with other trusted adults who will deeply listen. This may be a close friend, therapist, or support group.
- Ask for and accept help. Let others know specifically what you need, such as babysitting for a few hours, running to the grocery store, or a gift certificate for a meal out. Easing the burden of juggling parenting responsibilities while grieving is important.
- Rest. Set aside even just a few minutes a day to do what helps calm you. This could be exercise, journaling, or a meditation practice.
- Be gentle with yourself. Parents often put pressure on themselves to be perfect. But grief is messy, and your role as a parent is to guide your kids through it in a supportive way, not a perfect way. It's inevitable that you are going to have hard days and you might not be at your best. Offer yourself love and compassion just as you would to your kids. And give yourself a little credit - maybe you don't always have it all together, but you keep showing up anyway.

SUPPORT YOUR CHILDREN'S COPING

You may not be able to take away the grief journey for your kids, but there are ways you can support their resiliency as they cope.

- Provide consistency, routine, and family rules. Children need limits to feel safe, especially at a time when they are already feeling vulnerable.
- Set a good example. You don't have to hide your feelings – as long as you don't put your child in a position where they feel like they have to take care of you. Acknowledge your feelings while reassuring them that you can still take care of them and provide for their needs. Sharing your feelings shows your children that feelings are acceptable, normal, and gives them permission to feel theirs too.
- Listen. Listening to your children with warmth and empathy is a powerful way to build resilience. Listening helps them become more aware of their feelings and validates their experience. Don't forget to ask, "How can I help?" as they deal with the difficulties they face.
- Provide open and honest communication, appropriate to their developmental level. Sometimes parents feel pressure to have the right answers. It's ok if you don't always know the right thing to say, children just need to know you are honest and available. Also, as your child feels ready to absorb more information, they will feel comfortable to come to you with questions.

Parenthood requires that we give everything we can, each and every day. Parenting through grief is even tougher, and these strategies just might make the path more manageable.

Sharon Vineall, LCSW, Bereavement Counselor

Sharon Vineall has been a licensed clinical social worker at Hospice of Santa Barbara since 2010, providing support to patients, clients, and families through Patient Care Services and Adult Bereavement Services. She first became familiar with HSB as a medical social worker at Cottage Hospital, serving patients and families coping with end of life circumstances. She attended a presentation given by HSB pioneer Gail Rink, and knew right away that she wanted to be part of the organization. Sharon's primary specialty areas are perinatal loss and working with parents who have lost a partner. Sharon has an advanced certification in hospice and palliative care, specialized trauma training, and training in advance care directives. Sharon believes that self care is important in her profession, and she does this through meditation, swimming, reading, and time with family.