



## **Tips for Parents: When a Mommy or Daddy Dies**

*The death of a spouse causes tremendous grief and change for you and your children. This Tips for Parents contains ideas and resources to guide you as you help your children grieve during this difficult time.*

### **Be Honest and Direct**

Telling a child that their mom or dad has died is something no one wants to do. But it is important that you are honest and direct with your children. Take time alone with them and explain that your spouse has died. If your children are younger than elementary, they may not understand death. Explain it as accurately as possible. Avoid using the word “sleep” as this may frighten kids about falling asleep.

While you may find it difficult to talk about, it is important that you encourage your children to ask questions and that you answer them honestly, without adding unnecessary details that might frighten them without reason.

### **Encourage Them to Express what They Feel**

Express your feelings to your children. Tell them that you’re sad, or angry, or afraid...whatever you’re feeling, and encourage them to do the same. At first, they may be stunned and not know what they feel. Everyone deals with the death of a loved one differently, and has different feelings at different times.

For children to grieve in a healthy way, they should have regular opportunity to talk about their feelings—either with you, a trusted friend or family member, or with a counselor or therapist.

While death brings many uncomfortable feelings, and it is tempting to avoid the subject, telling your children how you’re feeling often, and even crying with them, is much healthier than ignoring the death, and allows you and them to heal over time. It is important to remember, however, that you do not overburden your kids with your emotions or caring for you. You need to find adult support.

### **Give Them Extra Time, Love and Affection**

When a spouse dies, there are many additional responsibilities the surviving spouse must take on. One of these is to give your children even more of your time, love and affection than before. While you can’t replace the unique time they spent with their lost parent, they will need extra support from you as they grieve.

You may feel overwhelmed with the additional responsibilities, may have to increase how much you work, and may be so exhausted that giving your children extra time seems impossible. Doing all of this on your own is too much, and you're going to need to ask for help from others.

## **Ask for Help**

Your spouse's death may have you feeling that you must do the work of two people. If you try to do this, you're going to crash, because you are just one person. Your children need you and keeping yourself healthy and strong is important for all of you.

This is not the time to be shy about asking for help. Take whatever help is offered to you, and don't be afraid to ask for help when you need it.

You'll also need to prioritize and spend your energy only on the essential tasks. While work may distract you, disappearing in your work will hurt you and your children. Don't expect yourself to keep the house and yard perfect, and do take advantage of convenience items you can afford.

## **Take Care of Yourself**

In order to give your children the support and love they need, you **MUST** take care of yourself. This means getting away on a regular basis—whether it be a 30 minute walk, a trip to get your hair cut, or going out with a friend. Allow family and friends to care for your children from time to time so that you can refresh your energy stores and cope with your loss in a healthy way.

Nothing but time can ease the pain you're feeling, but there's no guilt in doing something comforting for yourself.

## **Memories are Important**

For some people, the death of a loved one is so painful that they feel they can't bear to think or talk about it, even after years have gone by. It is essential to your children's mental health that their lost parent is remembered and talked about. Keep photos and family videos around, and look at them from time to time. Remember fun times together, and unique things you all loved about your spouse.

## **No One can Replace Your Spouse**

Everyone moves through the grieving process at a different pace. After some time, you may feel that it is time to move on, and begin dating again. Your children may or may not be ready for this.

Make sure they understand that no one could replace the loved one you all lost, and you aren't trying to do that. Explain that being a single parent is rewarding, but also difficult and at times, lonely. Tell your children that you love their company, but most adults need another adult to share their life with and to support them.

Do not force your children to show interest, love or affection for the new person in your life—but it is OK to require that they behave politely. Allow them to communicate how they feel and let their feelings develop naturally, at their own pace.

## **Counseling is for the Strong**

The death of a spouse or parent is one of the most painful things that can happen in life. Feelings of loss, sadness, anger, guilt and more are natural, but difficult. Most people can benefit from talking about these feelings with a counselor, therapist, or psychologist. This is not a sign of weakness, but one of strength. Knowing when to ask for help, and working to keep yourself and your children mentally healthy is a character strength, and a choice you'll never regret.

### **For more information:**

[Death in the Family](#), from the American Academy of Pediatrics

[Loss and Grieving with Kids](#), from Family Education

You may also find this related Tips for Parents helpful:

[Tips for Parents: Listening to Your Kids](#)

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