

Excerpts From:
**Getting Through Grief;
From a Parent's Point of View**

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Many of us, SIDS parents, family and friends, ask when will the pain be gone? Why doesn't my grief follow the stages and timelines the books say? Why do I feel so lonely? Debbie Gemmill, who lost her seven-month-old son, Tyler Dean in 1982, discusses many of these issues in Getting Through Grief. Debbie is described by Thomas G. Keens, MD, as a "Poet Laureate of SIDS," with her many supportive and informational publications regarding Sudden Infant Death Syndrome.
--Christine Hanson-Hughes, SIDS parent, Renton, WA

Could You Please Just Listen?

My baby has just died. Please don't tell me you know how I feel. You don't. You can't. I hope you never do.

Don't tell me he's with God and I should be happy. How can I be happy when every time I go into his nursery all I see is an empty crib and toys that will never be played with? How can I be happy when my arms ache to hold him?

Please don't tell me God needed another angel. It's hard for me to understand why God would take away this little one who was so loved. Maybe I'll understand later. But for right now...let God find another angel.

Please, please, please don't tell me I'll have other children. Maybe I will...but my son was not a puppy that ran away...he cannot be replaced.

Maybe you could just listen when I remember out loud all the things we did together...the walks, the early morning feedings, the first time he rolled over. Maybe you could just sit with me while I cry over all the things we'll never do together.

Please don't tell me it could be worse. How?

I really don't want to hear about your grandfather's death. It's not the same. Don't think my pain will be eased by comparison. Of course I'm glad that he didn't suffer, but I'd be a lot happier if he hadn't died at all.

I know it must be hard for you, but would you mind looking at his picture just one more time? We don't have many of him, and I'm just a little bit afraid that I may forget what he looked like. He wasn't here that long, you know.

Could you please just listen?

Don't tell me I'll get over it. There is no "over it," only through it. Maybe you could just be with me while I take my first steps through it.

Please don't tell me I should be glad he was just a baby, or that at least I didn't get to know him. I knew him. I knew him before I ever saw him. He is part of me. And now he is gone. I haven't just lost a seven-month-old baby. I have lost a part of myself.

I know you mean well, but please don't expect me to tell you how to help me. I'd tell you if I knew. But right now I can hardly put one foot in front of the other. Maybe if you looked around, you could find some things to do, like taking my daughter for a walk, or doing the dishes, or making some coffee. Please don't try to remove my pain or distract me from it. I have to feel this way now.

Maybe you could just listen.

Where Will You Go From Here?

"Turn around," I shouted to Jordan, my adventurous seven-year-old. He was walking backwards and headed straight for a streetlight pole. He ignored my warning, and in what seemed like slow motion, I watched an accident in the making. Sure enough, he backed right into the metal pole, smacking his head and shaking up both of us.

Holding him close and touching the fast-forming lump on the back of his head, I asked him, "Why in the world were you walking **backwards**?" He looked at me, fighting back tears, looking somehow smaller than he is, and replied, "So I could see where I used to be."

I spent a long time after Tyler's death looking back at where I used to be. It was a pretty nice place – a marriage that was working, two little children (a girl *and* a boy – my dream!), a return to college, the beginnings of a possible writing career. I couldn't have written a better script.

And then, in a second on a sunny May afternoon, it was over. Everything shattered, all hope for a happy life gone. How would we ever go on?

Grieving, they say, is the process we go through when we have lost someone or something. For parents who have lost a baby, I think it is both. We have lost the most precious someone there is: our child. The baby we carried, cuddled, and cared for. The little one who looked like us, who had our nose or our smile. The girl whose hair we would put pretty ribbons in. The boy who would carry on the family name. Our future.

When a baby dies suddenly and unexpectedly, much is lost: who we were, what our life had been, any idea of where we were headed. I was focusing on where I had been – what I had lost because it was impossible to know where I was going to go from there. For a long time I think I was, like Jordan, "walking backwards." It seemed much easier to remember what had been than to face what would come.

I don't remember exactly when I started talking about the future except, of course, for the discussions I had with other SIDS parents about having another baby. At support meetings my new friends spoke to me about just putting one foot in front of the other. They understood the overwhelming aspect of life after a baby's death. ***Don't plan your whole life, they said gently. Just plan today. The rest will come.***

My life will never be the same, I cried. ***You are right, they said. It never will.***

And it hasn't been. I don't think we are ever the same person we used to be after we have lost a child. That doesn't mean, however, that it has to be a change for the worse. Or, that losing a child somehow makes you a better person. I have heard both theories and I agree with neither. What I think it means is that although we had no control over our child's death, we certainly do have control over the decisions we make about our lives afterwards. We can decide to be angry, bitter, hopeless. Or we can face life, putting one foot in front of the other. Facing life with hope is not a betrayal of your child's memory. Being happy is not disloyal.

When I talk with other SIDS parents, we often wonder out loud where we'd be if SIDS hadn't jumped in and changed the road signs on us. None of us knows, of course, and perhaps it doesn't matter. What we all seem to agree on is that we want our babies' lives to be as important as their deaths. To give up on everything, to walk backwards, seems to me to be the ultimate betrayal.

It takes some time to turn yourself around, to look ahead while taking a bit of the past with you. It's a little like carrying baggage filled with what was and what wasn't, and sometimes it gets to be a heavy load. Sometimes you have to turn your attention to the weight alongside of you, and while you are looking away for a minute in order to carry it, you may smack into a light pole.

But at least you'll have been walking forward.

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