

**Begin Here - Do No Harm:  
A Father Talks About Where to Start When Someone You Love Experiences Loss**

**How can we help families through the first raw pain of losing a loved one?**

Grief is a normal emotional response, yet disruptions like a death in the family are something we don't train or prepare ourselves for.

I remember how I went from being optimistic that my son would recover to somewhat in denial. *How could he die from this? How do we not have the science and technology to make him recover?* I will never forget my father-in-law (who was in his late 80s at the time) being so distraught because he could not easily accept that he outlived his 16-month-old grandchild.

The world turned a different color the day my son died. Feelings of defeat and grief and shock soon joined those of guilt and loss of identity. I was no longer the person I thought I was. And my future would never be aligned with what I thought it would be only a month earlier.

I have chatted with and advised many parents grieving over the death of a child from a foodborne pathogen, but I have also met with many parents whose child survived such an event. These children and their families face life-long medical complications and concerns. In some cases, where the child will never live a normal adolescent or teen life, I have talked with parents having guilty feelings over a child that survived ... but *who is not the child* they had before the illness.

Pain takes on many different dimensions and will result in myriad impacts on parents.

Step one - get through the day.

Step two - get through the week.

Step three - get through the month ...

When talking with parents who have other children, I remind them that they are not only the parent of the child who died, but also of the ones that are still alive. I had a conversation with a crying father once, who was convinced that he could not be a good father to his 2-year-old because he was not able to prevent his 4-year-old from dying. I asked him, *"Would your 4-year-old have wanted her little sister to have a childhood that was less than ideal?"* That question sparked within him a new way of thinking of his future.

**How should we communicate with the community of friends, extended family members, and acquaintances on what to say and do/what not to say and do?**

This one is not easy. The deaths of children especially, cannot find any sort of a 'best' time of year, but the ones that take place during the summer and early fall come with an additional level of problems for many. At a time when grieving parents are still dealing with the stinging rawness of their loss, their friends, work peers, and family are planning for and inviting them to social events - most of which include food as a main feature. It is already hard enough dealing with the loss alone, but finding the strength to be social is nearly impossible. Add on to that the layer of people being excited about the very thing (food) that played a starring role in their child's death - that is salt in the wounds.

With Thanksgiving on the horizon, one parent described his anger at his family a couple of months after his losing his child. He ached as he told of how his aunt offered to host the family get together that year, but then asked that he and his family not bring up their kid's death or come to the gathering 'bringing

sadness and depression' because it would be a 'downer' for such a time to be thankful. That one still hurts!

Another parent confided in me how hurt she was that she still cannot talk about her son's death with friends, people at work, and even with family. She shared her understanding that people move on, but expressed anger that these same close people in her life simply expected her to move on quickly as well.

### **For those feeling the loss, how do we help them know that they are not alone?**

Along with all the technology and data that industry focuses on as part of the solution for food safety, we cannot neglect the human element. The "Why" behind any purchase or culture or workforce leadership - as well as policy - must include an *understanding of the true burden of disease*. Advocates like myself and like those who work with Stop Foodborne Illness provide a critical role in making sure that the very people who we trust to mitigate failures in food safety are supported with the names, faces and stories of those who will never recover from a foodborne pathogen.

We must look beyond data and statistics, as well as charts and graphs, in order to drive a mission and culture of food safety. Sharing about the life of a child who perished is a powerful way to not only give strength to those food safety heroes in industry and in government, but also to help grieving parents know that they do not stand alone. Economic policy theory holds that those special interests in smaller numbers will stand to gain no benefit from speaking up. I disagree. The validation of a life, and of a life lost, is priceless. The acknowledgement of a death and of not being able to return to normal is important for those who feel alone.

### **How can we keep the essence and meaning of a lost loved one alive and relevant?**

A line from a song has kept me company all these 27 years. In Highlander (yes, the movie with Sean Connery) the soundtrack by Queen included a song tied to the immortal main character's loss of his wife due to her being mortal. A line - "It's always a rainy day without you ..." started to be a repeated track in my head. I held it with great meaning, but that would change over time.

Eventually, through my work over the years, new meaning was added - perhaps a new verse to the lyrics. I saw that, through advocacy and teaching and my writing and public speaking, that rain could be seen through every window while I was still productive and constructive, and even successful and fulfilled inside.

Rain does not need to stop us from being a parent or a friend or a neighbor or an employee or a leader ... even if it never goes away.

Darin Detwiler, 2021