

How to talk to a parent who has lost a child. From someone who's been there.



Ella Nicole Hayward

By SAMANTHA HAYWARD
Monday 22 July 2013

The soul destroying agony of your child dying is only truly known and understood by those who have endured it. Four years on, I still glance down at my daughters grave in disbelief. Visiting my child's grave is surreal. It's almost like I've vacated my body and I'm watching someone I don't know standing there putting flowers down.

Is this really my life ?

Only a parent understands the powerful bond you have with your child; that absolute undying love you have and that monumental desire that roars like an open fire inside you to protect that child at all costs. It is openly said that a parent will lay down their life for their child, but it is not until you have your own that you truly understand these fierce emotions. Parenting is wearing your heart on the outside of your body. Whatever you imagine it might be like to have your child die, multiply that by about a trillion and you're probably not even close.

On the surface it appears society is accepting of this unbearable sadness and people are supportive and open to talking about it. However, in my situation I've been surprised by people's genuine kindness and empathy as much as I've been repeatedly shocked & disappointed by their lack of it. It's necessary for bereaved parents to be able to talk and, most of all, be able to talk openly. I've found it's the only thing which dispels the trauma.

Sure, friends and family have been supportive, but it's proven to be the case with me that there is a mandate as for how long their unwavering support, patience, understanding, concern and empathy lasts. The truth is, the situation is so unbearably sad that it becomes incredibly emotionally draining on the other person.

The realisation that they can't fix your sadness sets in, the frustration builds because not even they can see an end in sight, then gradually it starts to impede on the happiness in their life. They haven't lost their child so why should they spend all their time sad about yours?

I will, for the sake of all the other parents out there with empty arms, write ten things I wish people knew about the loss of a child. Maybe one of my ten points might make a difference to a bereaved parent's life.

1. Four years on I get up every day with the exact same sadness I had the day Ella died. The only difference is I'm more skilled at hiding it and I'm much more used to the agony of my broken heart. The shock has somewhat lessened, but I do still find myself thinking I can't believe this happened. I thought that only happened to other people. You asked how I was in the beginning yet you stopped, why? Where did you get the information on what week or month was good to stop asking?

2. Please don't tell me that all you want is for me to be happy again. Nobody wants that more than I do, but it's something that can only be achieved with time. On top of that, I have to find a new happiness. The happiness I once felt, that carefree feeling, will never return in its entirety. It also helps to have the patience and understanding from loved ones.

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3. Please don't say 'I want the old Sam back!' Or, I can see the old Sam coming back! Sam's not coming back. This is who I am now. If you only knew the horror I witnessed and endured you would know it's not humanly possible for me to ever be the same person again. Losing a child changes who you are. I've been told my eyes look haunted.

It's a strange thing for someone to tell a grieving mother, but it's true – I am haunted. My views on the world have changed, things that were once important are not now and vice versa. I feel as though you're telling me two things here. Firstly you don't like the person I am and, secondly if the old Sam's not coming back I'm out of here. By the way there is nobody that misses the "old Sam" more than me!!! I'm mourning two deaths here; my daughter's and my former self.

4. If you chose to acknowledge my daughter's birthday or the anniversary of her death on the first year, it's terribly gut wrenching when you didn't bother to acknowledge the second or third or fourth. Do you think any subsequent birthday or anniversary is not as sad for me? It also says to me in very big neon lights that you've moved on and forgotten about my daughter.

5. Please stop with the continual comments about how lucky I am to have my other children particularly my daughter. Do I say this to you? Then why say it to me? I've buried my daughter do you seriously think I feel lucky?

6. It's not healthy to cry in front of the kids? You're wrong. It is perfectly healthy that they see I'm sad their sister has died. When someone dies it's normal to cry. What would not be normal would be for my children to grow up and think "I never even saw my Mum sad over Ella's death." That would paint me in a light that would tell them it's healthy to hide your emotions when obviously it's not.

7. I have four children I don't have three. If you want to ignore Ella as my third child because she's dead go for it but don't do it for me. Four not three!

8. There are still some days, yes four years on, that I still want to hide away from the world and take a break from pretending everything is oh so wonderful and I'm all better.

Please don't just assume I've thrown in the towel, or worse, actually be so thoughtless as to wonder what's wrong with me. I still know I've married the catch of the century and my children are gorgeously divine and I have a beautiful house, but I'm grieving.

It's mentally exhausting, especially raising three young children and on top of that maintaining a strong and loving marriage. Unbeknownst to you, I'm dealing with not just my own grief, but my beautiful husbands and my two boys.

It would be nice if you congratulated me on the state of my family because keeping it together, stable and happy, has been hard work.

9. I did notice. To the friends and family that found the entire death and dealing with my sadness all too hard and held secret events behind our backs that were lied about, stopped inviting us to things we had always been included in and slowly ended our relationship thinking I didn't notice.

I did notice. The only reason why I never said anything is because I'm not wasting my words on your shameful behaviour. I am thankful for something though – I didn't waste any more time on people that were capable of such shallowness and cruelty. Please don't fear. I would be the first one by your side if the same thing happened to you. That should give you some indication of how horrible it is.



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10. Grieving for a child lasts until you see them again. It's a lifetime. If you're wondering how long your friend or family member might be grieving for, the answer is forever. Don't rush them, don't trivialise their sadness, don't make them feel guilty for being sad and when they talk to you, open your ears and listen, really listen to what they're telling you. It's possible you'll learn something. Don't be so cruel as to give up on them remember it's not about you it's about them.

I've been left repeatedly heart broken as friends that I truly loved and never thought would walk away from me tossed me into the too hard basket or – more hurtfully – the crazy basket. Phone calls stopped, text messages stopped, comments on Facebook stopped and I get the same thing every time. “Sorry darling I'm just flat out”, “Let's catch up soon” and “I miss you.” The list could keep going but I get it. I'm not the type of person either that is going to pursue a friendship I know the other person doesn't want. Everyone has a conscience and thankfully I don't have to live with theirs.

You would think there are a lot of articles that raise awareness of the awful process associated with grieving for a child, but even stories from other parents are a rarity. The sad reality is there just isn't enough said or printed. You seldom hear through the media about grieving for a child and the impact their death has on all the various people involved.

It can destroy a marriage instantly, it can leave siblings hurt, confused and angry. Often siblings are too young to understand, they're angry that their family is not the same and even angrier that they don't recognise their parents. Losing their sibling is bad enough but so much more is lost for these siblings that is never recognised. I could count on one hand the amount of times I've been asked how my boys were.

You might hear about the gory details surrounding a child's death in the media but that's about all. There should be so much more written about this topic, and additionally it should be talked about more openly than it is. I'm disappointed not just for me but for all the other grieving parents in society that this topic is met with so much fear and silence.

The bottom line is people are uncomfortable with the situation and I really don't know why. My feelings tell me it is such an horrific thing that most people don't want to know about it. Maybe they fear through knowing so much they might become obsessed with their own children dying. Parents worry enough about their children already. Do they really need the added worry about knowing how your child died?

Without question, my daughter Ella dying suddenly has been the worst thing that has happened in my 37 years here on Earth. I doubt that anything in my future is going to top it. Actually, just between us, I beg and plead with God on a daily basis that nothing ever does top that experience, but the truth is I just don't know.

I'm not a mind reader nor do I have a magic pair of glasses where I can see how the rest of my life will unfold. I just have to hope that nothing ever does, but I have a very real fear it will because it has actually already happened to me. I know without having to hold a psychology degree that having those fears is normal.

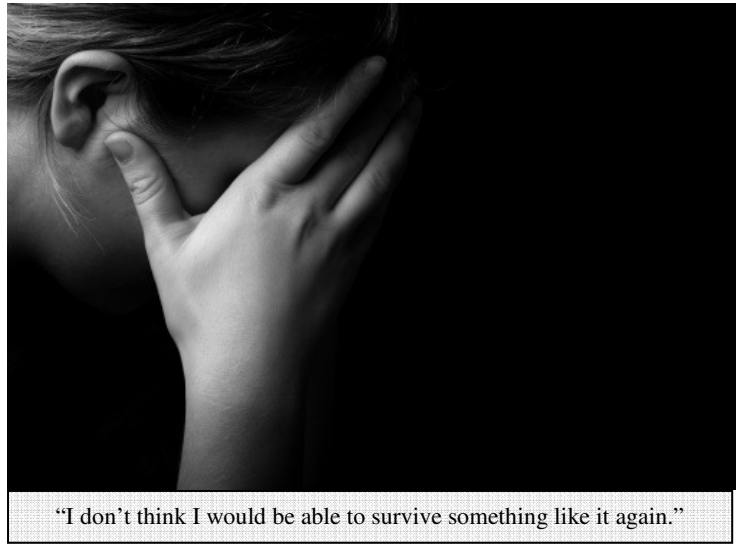
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What I've endured, losing my little princess, has been so unimaginably horrific that I don't think I would survive something like it again.

What I have had to give emotionally to get through it has dwindled away all my mental strength – just like twenty cents pieces in a kid's piggy bank.

I'm broke – not broken – I'm broke emotionally. I know all the energy I've needed over the last four years has not just been spent on my grief for Ella.

It's been on trying to get my friends and family to understand what it's like to walk in my shoes. I'm angry about that. When I should have been grieving, I was defending myself.



I'm probably very close to being as angry about that as I am about her death. I wish I wasn't angry. Lord knows I don't need another emotion but I don't know how to not be angry, especially with some of the things that people have said and done to me. I talk and talk yet I'm often never actually heard.

I'm not sure if it's a lack of literature around or perhaps that people simply don't want to read it because it's so awful and they don't want to know someone they love and care about it experiencing so much agony. I personally know though, if I found out a family member or friend had been diagnosed with an illness or disease, or worse, their child, I would be on Google immediately finding out more about it and how I could help them the best. So why is it that this doesn't seem to apply with the death of a child?

Most people just think they know. I find this extremely frustrating. The death of your child is the worst thing that can happen to a person, yet most feel educated enough to advise, to criticise, to lend their words of wisdom when they don't know the first thing about it. Get over it? Why don't we see if you could get over it first!

Most people wouldn't know that when I meet someone new I instantly become uncomfortable and filled with dread. I know at any moment when I engage in conversation the question is going to arise about my family and how many children do I have? I would love not to have to tell them. Life would be a lot easier if I could take that path. However, I do have another child. Her name is Ella. She would now be four but she died when she was 19 days old. She isn't lost – I know exactly where she is, she's dead.

Ella is my third child and she deserves to be acknowledged just as much as my other children. I've lied before saying I have only three children, but the guilt that follows me around for days on end is just simply not worth it. I can actually hear Ella saying to me "don't I matter anymore Mummy?" "Why were you too ashamed to talk about me?"

So personally for me, as much as I don't want to tell someone I don't personally know very well that my daughter is dead, the guilt of not acknowledging her is worse. I don't have three children, I have four and my daughter is not my only daughter – I have another as well. It's pot luck what their reaction is going to be. There's no telling what they're going to say. You just have to close your eyes, cover your broken heart and hope they don't plunge that knife further in.

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If I could have my questions answered on why people give so much advice on a topic that they know so little about, it would really help me. What has surprised me so much since Ella's death is how little empathy there is in the world. Empathy to me is a no brainer. You just imagine you're in the other persons shoes, simple yes? Apparently no. Just think how you would like to be treated and if you wouldn't like it don't do it. You never know what your life holds – one day it could be you wearing my shoes!

I hope this article about my personal thoughts and opinions helps at least one person understand to some degree what life is like for the bereaved parent ♥

I dedicate this article to my soul mate, Darren. I'm the luckiest girl in the world having you, my darling. I love you more and more everyday you're simply perfect and after fifteen years my heart still skips a beat with I see you. My friend Natalie Donnelly & her daughter Eryn. To put it simply: she is an angel and if the world was full of Natalies, it would be a better place. Also my bestie Liv thank you for letting me be and never smothering me with pointless words. Love you both xx



Samantha Hayward

Samantha Hayward is at stay at home married with four children.

Tragically, 4 years ago her eldest daughter Ella died suddenly at 19 days to undiagnosed Viral Myocarditis.