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SURVIVE AND THRIVE

When a Mother's Heart is Broken

By Barbara Rubel

Why aren't you calling? I bet you have a host of reasons from not knowing what to say to fear you might say the wrong thing. It's not easy picking up the phone to call a grieving mother after a child has suddenly and traumatically died.

It's a fact of life that although mothers give life, they also experience loss. The death of a child becomes an event story that changes the fiber of her being. Consider, for example, the mother of an 18 year old son who died of a drug overdose in his senior year of high school. Looking forward to college in the fall, he wanted to be a lawyer. His drug misuse ended his future plans. Also, consider the mother whose 27 year old daughter died by suicide leaving behind two small children and a husband who loved her dearly. The bereaved mom was overwhelmed by sadness, stigma, and pain. Their loving relationship was shattered in a second.

Further, consider the grieving mother of a 36 year old son who was murdered while playing basketball at a local park. As he left the house, he kissed his wife goodbye. He promised to pick up his son from a tutoring lesson after the game. His family expected him to come home. A knife to his chest stopped that from happening. The man who killed him has yet to be found. These event stories shatter the world of these mothers. Undoubtedly, they know that no one can take their child's place. Hence, they experience intense yearning or longing as they attempt to stay spiritually connected to their child.

This past month, I talked with a mother who said that when a mother's heart is broken, a part of herself has died. Overwhelming waves of anguish can become disabling. Relentless sadness, guilt, and bitterness can be difficult to control as she struggles to find meaning since the loss.

You have to admit that this is not an easy topic to explore. The thought of helping a bereaved family member, friend, or co-worker, is stressful. Actually doing it can be challenging. As a Thanatologist, I'm a specialist in the dying and grieving process, social attitudes toward death related to ritual and memorialization, and the social and psychological aspects of traumatic loss. I want to deeply listen as I step into a bereaved mother's story. Most people have fears and anxieties about doing so.

Consider for a moment how you would feel if you were listening to a bereaved mother share her story. Dig deep down inside your own heart to find compassion. Be empathetic. Imagine yourself offering the gift of presence. See yourself paying attention to what is being said. Moreover, paying attention to those things not being said. Attempt to be comfortable with the silence and the tears. Grief is heartbreaking. Put your own fears away and focus on what she needs – someone to deeply listen.

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