DO CHILDREN GRIEVE?

Yes, children grieve. Like adults, they struggle with emotions including sadness, anger, fear, and guilt. But children understand death and express their emotions in different ways, depending on their age and developmental level. And as they grow up, they experience different aspects of their loss at different stages. Children need ongoing support from the adults who love them, and they sometimes need additional help from professionals to deal with the loss of an important person in their lives.

In this issue, four survivors share their stories about children dealing with loss. If you have concerns about a child in your life who is struggling with grief, please contact the Foundation. We can send you a book or brochure, help you find grief support services in your area, or put you in touch with someone else who has been in a similar situation.

Kathy Guyer-Martin, wife of Mike Guyer (1996-NC)

Kathy writes about suddenly becoming a single mom to her two daughters. Kathy married Joe Martin in 2001. My daughters were 12 and 7 when Mike died after 2 1/2 months in the hospital. My older daughter was a typical “Daddy’s Girl,” and she and her dad were inseparable. I was suddenly faced with being a single parent and having to deal with the girls’ grief and pain, as well as my own. This was a path that I had never dreamed of following.

As a mom, I had kissed and hugged away scrapes and bruises, driven monsters out of closets, and comforted my girls when they had nightmares. I learned that grief was nothing like the things that we had dealt with. I was not prepared for the feelings that my girls experienced. Yes, I was feeling the same thing, but I did not realize children have very similar feelings when a parent dies. It took me a while to see that things were not right and that my older daughter in particular was in a downward spiral of anger, grief, and guilt.

Looking back on those most difficult times when we were all struggling so badly, one of the things that I firmly believe I did right was to seek professional counseling for my children and myself. I just wish that I had not waited so long to do it. It took almost losing my older child in a suicide attempt to take that step. We learned that grieving is a natural process and that there are no specific remedies or timelines. I learned that the feelings my girls were experiencing needed to be fully acknowledged. We each learned to talk about our feelings and fears, we learned to talk about Mike and, after almost a year, we finally began talking about “tomorrow.”

We want to hear from you about... handling multiple losses.

What do you do when the loss of a loved one is only one of several major losses you have to deal with in a short time? We know that, in addition to the death of your firefighter, many of you have had to deal with serious illness in yourself or a family member, additional deaths, major financial difficulty, and other personal adversity.

Would you be willing to share your story in The Journey? What helped you get through the darkest days? What advice would you offer to others who are in a similar situation? Please send your stories, by May 31st, to:

The Journey • National Fallen Firefighters Foundation
P.O. Drawer 498, Emmitsburg, MD 21727
(301) 447-1365 firehero@firehero.org

Anne Wade, wife of Dana Schoolman (1988-IL)

Anne writes about her son, who is now all grown up.

A few weeks later, the phone rang, and Cole beat me to it again. As I got close enough, I heard him say, “He’s not here. He’s at the tavern,” and again he hung up the phone. I said, “Cole, why did you tell someone your father was at the tavern?” He looked at me, as serious as can be, and said, “Well, you TOLD me not to tell them he was dead!”

To this day, it makes me smile when I think about it. Children of fallen firefighters have to grow up a little faster than other children their age. There were so many, many bad days, but having my children made it so much easier. I think losing Dana brought us closer than most families.

I joined the fire department in 1989, and Cole joined in 2004, so he’s a rookie. Poor Cole, not only does he have to answer to me as a Mom, now he has to answer to me as his captain!

When my husband was killed, we had been blessed with two children. Kellie was six at the time, and Cole was three. Needless to say, the days and weeks following Dana’s death were very trying for us all. There were many things we had to get used to that we hadn’t worried about in the past. One of those, simple as it may seem, was answering the phone.

Cole loved to answer the phone, and it was always a race to try to beat him to it. A few weeks after Dana’s death, the phone rang, and Cole raced to get it. As I neared the kitchen, I heard Cole say, “He’s not here. He’s dead,” and he hung up the phone. Without trying to scare him, I told him he should never tell anyone that his Daddy was dead, because we never knew who could be calling.

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Continued inside
My heart goes out to those of you who unexpectedly found yourselves as single parents, struggling with grieving children. I hope that you will take comfort in knowing there are those who feel your pain and understand the challenges that you face. I encourage you to take advantage of the resources available to you and your children and reach out for help if you need it. There are wonderful counselors who are trained to work with grieving children and families. Don’t be afraid to take that step. It is what saved our family. I hope that someday soon you and your children will be able to find hope and embrace those tomorrows.

When I lost my dad, I was 17 years old, five days from starting my senior year of high school, and had the world in the palm of my hand. Or so I thought. That day changed my world forever.

I had a one-track mind for my future and no contingency plan. I was accepted to the Air Force Academy and was ready to lead my life as a career military officer. After much thought, I turned down the nomination to stay closer to home. I was scared that something bad would happen to my mom or my brother and I wouldn’t be there. I was scared to move on with my life. I had convinced myself that by moving forward, and letting my mom move forward, everyone would forget my dad.

But living in the past does not get you anywhere. It clouds the life that you have to lead.

If I could change one thing about the way I handled my dad’s death, it would be allowing people to help me. Instead, I chose to fight everything—friends, family, my attitude, and my feelings. I felt that I could not let anyone know that I was sad and hurt. Sure, I went to counselors for 3-5 years but they never seemed to “get me.” It did not take long before I started to tell them what they wanted to hear. Little did they know, a part of me was hurting so bad and I did not know what to do about it. No one can tell you how to go through the grieving process, but you have to be willing to accept the feelings that go with the process and look for the support of others when you need it. The support was there for me but I refused to accept it. It took me seven years to accept my dad’s death.

My biggest heartaches were life’s biggest events. My dad got to see my brother graduate high school, but was not nearly every day. Phelan wakes up crying. Before I have the chance to get up, Declan stumbles out of bed, reaches inside her crib, and hands her a bottle. Phelan silences, and Declan climbs back into bed, leaving me simultaneously awestruck, proud, and exhausted. From that moment, I know I am doing something right. I feel proud of them, as I am sure my dad would be of me.

Jennifer Cormican-Pendleton, daughter of Bruce Cormican (1955-WI)

Jennifer writes about how life has changed since her dad’s death.

My mom has had quite a life—single parent, support, tolerance and understanding, but there is always a piece of my heart missing. I don’t know how my mom has come through the difficulties of her life with the strength that she shows and the positive attitude that she has. There is the old joke that every child dreads the day they turn into one of their parents. I can’t wait for the day that I can come close to being like my mom. I was blessed with 17 years of love and support from both my parents, and they taught me more than I will ever admit to them!

Ten years after my dad’s death, I still miss him, but I have learned that I have more strength and can endure more than I thought possible. My life will never be the same as I had envisioned it in 1995. I still struggle with the question “why” and have to remind myself that it does not really matter why. What matters is that I make the most of the life that I have. I am living my life the best that I can, knowing that my dad is with me every day. On his headstone, we had engraved words which I have finally come to understand: “What we keep in memory is ours forever.”