

## Surviving the Death of a Child

**By Donna Lamb, LCSW**

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*The Menninger Hope Adult Program*

Upon becoming a parent, most people are surprised to find within themselves a previously unrecognized capacity to love and a fierce need to protect; parents take on the role of provider, problem solver and advisor. This emotional bonding between parent and child occurs long before the child's birth, as each parent begins to fantasize about the child, imagining the life they will share.

Parents dream of having someone whom they can love unconditionally and who will love and need them; children provide the opportunity for parents to correct mistakes made during their own childhood and serve as carriers of the family name and family genes. Children provide a sense of purpose for the parents and, therefore, become an integral part of the parents' lives. The greatest fear of most parents is having a child die, as they cannot imagine being able to emotionally cope with such a loss.

A child's death, no matter the age of the child, is incomprehensible to parents. Bereaved parents feel oppressive feelings of failure in their roles as parents; their inability to prevent their child's death leads to overwhelming feelings of helplessness and of being violated. Their sense of self diminishes, and they feel disillusioned, empty and insecure. Parents, looking through their pain, are

disoriented and confused to see that somehow the world continues on even though nothing makes sense any more. Their instincts to provide for and protect the child continue after the death, but they are unable to act on these instincts; stormy nights often find bereaved parents awake, wondering if their child is in a safe, dry place.

Because bereaved parents represent the worst fear of every parent, they are avoided more than other mourners. Other family members are experiencing their own grief, friends don't know what to say or do and society expects parents to return to work in three days, being as productive as before. The child's death is socially invalidated. Parents often report feeling disconnected from reality, similar to being in a sensory deprivation chamber; without feedback from others; judging reality becomes impossible.

Numerous secondary losses accompany the death of a child, including loss of the family as it existed prior to the death. Surviving children lose the emotional, and perhaps physical, availability of their parents, grandparents "lose" their children to parental grief and spouses lose the support of each other—each whose emotional plate is so full that they cannot be there for the other. The impact of a child's death on a marital relationship cannot be underestimated. Neither parent will be the same person as they were before the death.

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Complete information on the eScrip program is available at [www.escrip.com](http://www.escrip.com). Registration may be completed at the same site. Questions about HAND's participation in the eScrip program may be directed to [info@HANDsupport.org](mailto:info@HANDsupport.org) or (650) 367-6993.

We urge all of our families, relatives and friends to participate in this great and effortless fundraising program. Remember to keep your eScrip registration current anytime your registered card numbers change or you change cards. eScrip contributions to HAND on behalf of our participating families have ranged up to \$350 per family per year!

## **Helping After Neonatal Death**

### **Chapters:**

**HAND of the Peninsula**  
P.O. Box 3693  
Redwood City, CA 94064  
(650) 579-0350 crisis line  
(650) 367-6993 office  
<http://www.HANDsupport.org>

**HAND of Santa Cruz Co.**  
P.O. Box 3693  
Redwood City, CA 94064  
(650) 367-6993 office  
(831) 438-4513

**HAND of Santa Clara,  
Contra Costa, Alameda  
Counties, Central Valley**  
1-888-908-HAND

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### **Helping Hands**

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## Surviving *continued from page 1*

Each parent had a unique relationship with the child and this uniqueness will be reflected in the grief process. Each parent's character differences will make their external and internal experiences of grief different: one may need to talk about the child constantly, while the other may find mention of the child too difficult; one may seek out friends for support, while the other may withdraw; one may want to allow surviving children to witness his/her grief responses, while the other may want to protect the children from the parent's pain; one may want to resume sexual intimacy, while the other may feel that enjoying any aspect of life is a betrayal of the child; one may find comfort in returning to work quickly, while the other may be unable to function.

It is not unusual for grief responses such as despair, anger, guilt and feelings of loss of control to increase in mothers for several years after the death. Fathers, on the other hand, typically experience a decrease in symptoms after the second year (Fish, 1986). Therefore, as the mother's grief is intensifying, the father's is decreasing, which further contributes to the isolation each parent feels in the marital relationship.

Especially problematic in parental grief is guilt, resulting from the parents' deep sense of responsibility for and helplessness after a child's death. Miles and Demi (1986) identify the following sources of parental guilt:

- ♦ **Death causation guilt:** resulting from parent's perceived contribution to or failure to protect the child from death
- ♦ **Illness-related guilt:** resulting from perceived deficiencies in the parental role during the child's illness or at the time of death
- ♦ **Parental role guilt:** the belief that the parent failed to live up to self- or societal expectation in the *overall* parental role
- ♦ **Moral guilt:** resulting from the belief that the child's death was punishment or retribution for something the parent did or failed to do

♦ **Survival guilt:** the belief that children should outlive their parents

♦ **Grief guilt:** resulting from the parent's behavioral or emotional reactions of grief at the time of or following the child's death.

It is often thought that the death of a child is a death knell for the marriage. This is not true. If a marital relationship was struggling prior to the child's death, the death *will* add another dimension to the struggle. If the marriage was strong, however, the relationship often ends up stronger than it was before.

Communication concerning what each needs and expects from the other is critical, balanced by an awareness that the partner may not be able to provide the support that is requested; other family members or friends may be needed for support. Most importantly, partners must realize that any distance they feel in their relationship during the

*“Partners must realize that any distance they feel in their relationship during the grief process is not necessarily a true reflection of real feelings for each other.”*

grief process is not necessarily a true reflection of real feelings for each other.

What may be seen as complicated grief responses in

individuals who have experienced the death of someone other than a child, may be seen as normal in parental grief. As long as the behavior is not physically, emotionally or psychosocially dysfunctional for too long, it can be viewed as normal parental grief.

As painful as the grief process will be, it is important that parents allow themselves to feel the pain of separation from their child so that they can, in the future, live a life that is not governed by intense pain. If attended to, the pain of parental grief does diminish, and a new life, which incorporates a spiritual and psychological relationship with the child, will unfold.

Fish, W. C. (1986). Differences of Grief Intensity in Bereaved Parents. In T. Rando (Ed.), *Parental Loss of a Child*. Champaign, IL: Research Press Co. Miles, M. S. and Demi, A. S. (1986). Guilt in Bereaved Parents. In T. Rando (Ed.), *Parental Loss of a Child*. Champaign, IL: Research Press Co. Copyright © 2005 The Menninger Clinic Reprinted with the author's permission

## Support Meetings

Support meetings are informal gatherings where parents can receive and give support by sharing common experiences as we work through and resolve our loss. We cordially invite you to attend.

Meetings may start out with a topic of discussion, but everyone is free to bring up any questions or aspects of their loss which may concern them.

Attending your first meeting does take courage, but parents who attend find a comforting network of support, encouragement, friendship and understanding.

Nothing is required of you. There are no dues or fees. You need not speak one word. Even if you no longer need the meetings for yourself, come and share your experiences with someone who has recently suffered a loss.

### HAND of the Peninsula

Support meetings are held on the first and third Wednesday of the month. Contact: Jill Ludwig (650) 367-6993

**Time:** 7:30-9:30 P.M.

**Dates:** March 5 and 19  
April 2 and 16  
May 7 and 21  
June 4 and 18  
July 2 and 16

**Location:** Ellsworth Room at Mills Health Center, 100 S. San Mateo Dr., San Mateo

### HAND of Santa Cruz

Support meetings are held on the third Wednesday of the month. Contact: Kristie Shulman (831) 438-4513.

**Time:** 7:30-9:30 P.M.

**Dates:** March 19  
April 16  
May 21

June 18

July 16

**Location:** Congregational Church of Soquel

## Pregnancy Support Meetings

Parents who are pregnant again after a loss have special emotional and psychological needs. Pregnancy Support Group meetings address the concerns of bereaved parents who have started or are thinking about starting another pregnancy. Fathers are especially encouraged to attend.

HAND of the Peninsula holds subsequent pregnancy support meetings on the second Wednesday of the month as needed. Please call the HAND office (650) 367-6993 if you plan to attend or need more information

**Time:** 7:30-9:30 P.M.

**Dates:** March 12  
April 9  
May 14  
June 11  
July 9

**Location:** Ellsworth Room at Mills Health Center, 100 S. San Mateo Dr., San Mateo

HAND of Santa Cruz subsequent pregnancy support meetings are held on the first Wednesday of each month. Please call (831) 438-4513 for more information.

## Births

**Desiderio Neko Salinas-Holz** — October 28, 2007, to Jen and Gabriela Salinas-Holz

**Fiona Ivy Darla Seikel** — November 2, 2007, to Kimberly Miles and Jerry Seikel

## Donations

Our warmest thanks to those who have sent donations to HAND of the Peninsula. It is through your support that HAND is able to grow and help others.

**Tami and Dan Sell**, in memory of Jennifer and Anthony Sell

**Irene and Maia Lustgarten**, in loving memory of Talia, our cousin and niece

**Jennifer and Chris Norton**, in memory of Cayley Andrea Norton

**Jen and Gabriela Salinas-Holz**, in memory of Delilah Graciela Salinas-Holz, our daughter

**Carla Altizer and Rod Pasion**, in memory of Zachary Pasion

**Jennifer Gilbert and Rob Fagen**, in memory of Grace Alice Gilbert-Fagen

**Rebecca Lombardo**, in memory of Monica Marie Lombardo on her 29th birthday

**Anu and Peter Minocha**, in memory of Kavin Minocha

**Jill Nelson and Joseph Twicken**, in memory of Talia Elise Nelson Twicken on her 9th birthday

**Melinda and Eric Ruchames**, in memory of Zachary Clark Ruchames

**Jennifer Schmidt and Mark Sarbiewski**, in memory of our daughters, Lily and Isabel

**Suzanne Gallie and Mark Mitchell**  
**Janella and Harry Thodos**  
**Christina Conklin and Richard McCluney**  
**Rebecca and Andrew Logan**

**Lisa and Christopher Kirby**, in memory of William Kirby

**Donations** *continued on page 5*

# Dates to Remember in 2008

**May 10** — HAND of the Peninsula's major annual fundraiser, *The Human Race* at Shoreline Park in Mountain View. Run or walk a 5K, 10K or walk a 3K along with your leashed dogs. Participants collect pledges from family and friends. More information is available at <http://www.vcsv.us>. A flyer and registration form are included in this issue.

**May 31** — *HAND of the Peninsula 25th Anniversary Member BBQ* at Huddart Park in Woodside. A day for all HAND families and their friends to mark a quarter century of support shared with parents throughout the San Francisco Bay Area and beyond. The event is free, however, the park charges \$5 for parking. For more information and to RSVP, please call HAND at (650) 367-6993 or email [info@HANDsupport.org](mailto:info@HANDsupport.org)

**Summer** — *The Scrapbooking Workshop* is an opportunity to gather all your precious mementos and collect them in a safe and long-lasting place. Come share your photos and ideas. Anyone interested in volunteering to run this gathering or in participating, please email [info@HANDsupport.org](mailto:info@HANDsupport.org)

**October 18** — This is National Infant and Pregnancy Loss Month and HAND of the Peninsula parents, family and friends gather annually at Huddart Park's Miwok Shelter in Woodside for a *Service of Remembrance*, from 10 a.m. to noon, to share poems, readings, listen to music and scatter wildflower seeds. The event is free, however, the park charges \$5 for parking. For more information call HAND at (650) 367-6993 or email [info@HANDsupport.org](mailto:info@HANDsupport.org)

## Donations *continued from page 4*

**Lisa and Andrew Cope**, in memory of Charles Joseph Cope, our son

**Teri and John Hastings**  
**Stephen Buchner, M.D.**  
**Diana and Howard Bujtor**

**Celia and Donald Hartnett**, in honor of HAND President, Joan Stone. Thank you for all you do for others and for HAND.

**Sharon and John Manning**, in memory of Baby Manning

**Rachel Kindt and Gregory Marcus**, in honor of Hannah and Becky Marcus

**Kathleen Addison, MA, MFCC**, in memory of Baby Mac and P.J.

**Christine Bartels**  
**Barbara Kirsch, Ph.D.**  
**Ann and Louie Schaffer**

**Aruna and Hemendra Desai**, in the loving memory of our granddaughter, Amaani Ariyana Desai

**Cheryl and Charles Gagliasso**, in honor of Emily

and John Corpos past, present and future

**Kristina Scott and David Pollack**, in honor of Danielle Luise Scott Pollack

**Barbara Intersimone**  
**Peter and Judith Mason Benson**  
**Jerilyn and Thomas Corso**  
**Laurie McLucas and William Crook**  
**Diana Spangler-Crawford**

**Caryn Goldman and Richard Hull**, in memory of Sasha Goldman-Hull

**Nina and Art Squillante**, in memory of Leonardo Charles Squillante

**Emily and John Corpos**, in memory of John Uebel

**Leslie and Frank Muennemann**, in memory of their son Ian, on his 20<sup>th</sup> birthday

**Tina and Max Mobley**, in memory of Miles Max Davey Mobley

**Susanne Brown**, in memory of Neema and Ideen Heydari

**Barbara Tadlock**, in honor of Allyson Fisch  
**Jayna and Aaron Whitt**, in honor of Allyson Fisch

# **HAND parents complete volunteer training**

Congratulations to HAND of the Peninsula parents **Kellie Bliss, Lisa Cope, Ronna Edwards, Michelle Lever and Elham Raoufian**, who spent Saturday, January 26, 2008, learning skills that will help them serve as support meeting facilitators, offer phone support or any myriad ways HAND parents may support each other. Emily Corpos and Celia Harnett, co-founders of HAND of the Peninsula, conducted the day-long training at Sacred Heart Preparatory High School in Atherton. Thank you to each and all of you for your generous service.

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