

Group's
EMERGENCY RESPONSE
HANDBOOK
for **SMALL GROUP LEADERS**



Group's Emergency Response Handbook for Small Group Leaders

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Credits

Contributors: Rev. Dr. L.H. Chamberlain, Jr.; Linda Crawford; Kelly M. Flanagan, Ph.D.; Kelly Schimmel Flanagan, Ph.D.; Kate S. Holburn; Rev. Dr. John C. Jorden; Rebekah Knight-Baughman, Ph.D.; Joy-Elizabeth F. Lawrence; James W. Miller; A. Koshy Muthalaly, Ph.D.; Summer Rivers Salomonsen; Carl Simmons; Trevor Simpson; Amber Van Schooneveld; Terri S. Watson, Psy.D.; and Amy Weaver

Editor: Roxanne Wieman

Creative Development Editor: Matt Lockhart

Chief Creative Officer: Joani Schultz

Assistant Editor: Amber Van Schooneveld

Book Designer/Print Production Artist: Pamela Poll Design

Cover Art Director/ Designer: Jeff A. Storm

Illustrator: Pamela Poll

Production Manager: Peggy Naylor

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Introduction

It's not easy losing a spouse. Or dealing with depression. Or facing down an addiction. It's hard and painful and brutal.

But it doesn't have to be lonely.

Christians should never have to face trials on their own. Those around them—their Christian brothers and sisters—should rise up and support them.

"Share each other's burdens, and in this way obey the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2).

Although it isn't easy going through trials, it's also tough being on the outside and trying to help those who are suffering.

You don't know what to do. You're worried about hurting their feelings or stepping on their toes or saying the exact *wrong* thing.

Of course you care—you love them! It isn't that you don't want to help—it's just that you don't know how.

Group's Emergency Response Handbook will help you come alongside those in your small group who are facing tough times. From care and counseling tips, to practical ideas for your small group, to what to say and what not to say, this book offers insight after insight into how to care for the hurting.

Of course, it'd be great if you never had to pick up this book! But the reality is that everyone faces tough times—including the people in your small group. And they need your help.

So when someone you love is going through a divorce, dealing with a rebellious child, or considering suicide...it's time to pick up this guide. Use the table of contents to find the specific hurt for which you're caring, and then flip to that section.

Once there, you'll find a **real life narrative**—a story from someone who's been there. Sometimes they're inspiring, and you'll read how the support and love of a small group sustained someone through a hard time. Other times they're disappointing and tell stories of people left alone

during tragedy or rejected during trial. Either way, these stories will move you, and they'll show you the importance of devoted friends.

Each section also includes **care and counseling tips** that will give you practical ideas for reaching out in love. From baking dinner, to mediating in arguments, to intentional reminiscing, these ideas will help you effectively support the hurting people in your small group.

Next, you'll find **group tips** for your whole small group. These practical ideas will help your entire group support the hurting member during his or her trial.

And, finally, you'll find an invaluable section on **what to say and what not to say** to your friend. The words we use can help or hurt a friend more than we know. This section will help you avoid the hurtful comments and use the helpful ones.

You'll also find useful boxes in each section that offer Scripture help, guidelines for referring your friend to a professional counselor, and additional resources, such as books and Web sites, that you can use as you support your hurting friend.

Our prayer for this book is that it will help you help a friend during a difficult time.

"He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us" (2 Corinthians 1:4).

The Death of a Child

Supporting Parents Through the Tragedy

with counseling insights from REV. DR. JOHN C. JORDEN
+ ministry tips from KATE S. HOLBURN

Several years into their marriage, Sean and Victoria experienced unbelievable joy when their son, Nathan, was born...then unbelievable pain when they lost him. Here is their story.

Emergency Response Handbook: *What was your family and church situation like at the time?*

Victoria: We were 27 and 28 with an 18-month-old daughter. Our church was small—about 120 people—and we were involved as ministry leaders.

Sean: About seven months into her pregnancy, Victoria woke in pain; she was in preterm labor at 34 weeks. The baby was transverse in the womb and couldn't be delivered, so they did an emergency C-section. And there was our son, Nathan—whom we were so incredibly thrilled to meet. He spent two weeks in an oxygen tent in the nursery. My mother came to help, but no one from the church ever came.

ERH: *What happened after you brought Nathan home?*

Victoria: We brought Nathan home when he reached five pounds. One day after about a week, he started crying and wouldn't stop. Sean was at work with our only car, and in those pre-cell phone days, I couldn't reach

him. I felt alone and didn't know who to turn to, but finally convinced a close acquaintance from church to drive us to the hospital.

At the hospital, it was chaos. The sense of the out-of-control... everything was happening so fast. They flew Nathan to another hospital by helicopter.

Sean: After more tests, the doctors told us that it was bacterial meningitis.

ERH: *What were the days that followed like for you?*

Victoria: We were at that hospital for six total days. We called our pastor once, and that was the only interaction we had with anyone from church. We didn't hear from anybody else. Yet we were completely unafraid. There was no doubt in our minds that Nathan would be healed. What a miraculous story it would make!

ERH: *What happened next?*

Sean: The doctor came and told us the news...Nathan was not going to be healed. That was when we had our first breakdown. We lost all physical strength and collapsed to the floor in broken grief.

Victoria: We made the devastating decision to take Nathan off the ventilator and signed the "Do Not Resuscitate" form. They disconnected Nathan's oxygen and left us alone with him. We held him and sang and talked to him as he faded. After a while we noticed that he was fighting to breathe in response to our voices. We didn't want to prolong his struggle, so we fell silent and waited. Afterward, we walked out into the dark parking garage. It was 3:00 a.m., and the realization hit us that nobody knew what had happened. No one was there to drive us home; no one was waiting at home with a quiet hug and a meal.

ERH: *What response did you get from your church after Nathan's death?*

Sean: Not knowing what else to do, people gave us advice and spiritual counsel. They had good intentions, but the words seemed harsh and minimizing. Some people simply avoided the subject altogether. They probably believed it would be better for us if we never talked about what happened or heard Nathan's name. Or at least it would be easier for them. People desperately wanted us to be the strong, well-adjusted, happy couple we'd been before.

Victoria: We felt isolated and abandoned, but, so no one would feel uncomfortable, we played the same game...not bringing Nathan up in conversation, putting on fake smiles, saying we were fine. We should have thought it was strange how little care we got. But there's no way to know how it's supposed to be. Only later did we realize what we were missing.

ERH: *What kind of needed support did you receive?*

Victoria: Two things stand out. First, a couple of friends bought Nathan's cemetery plot for us. It was a thoughtful gesture, and it took a practical burden off our shoulders. Also, a non-church friend came to me one day, enfolded me in a hug, and didn't say a single word. In that hug, I felt loved and understood.

ERH: *What was the impact on your marriage and your involvement in church?*

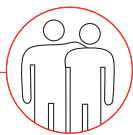
Sean: We started living parallel lives in our marriage—not fighting, but not connecting either. And because we weren't involved with each other and didn't have emotional or spiritual care from the church, we were also disconnected from God. We didn't pray together or open our Bibles for a long time. We were confused, disengaged. But we were never angry at anyone or God.

Victoria: We went right back to church after Nathan's death, but never recovered with the church, and we left after a year. It was only when we moved to another state for Sean's new job that we began to experience the richness of God's healing...and found the warm, living sanctuary we had been missing in a church body. We met people who loved and cared, listened and laughed.

ERH: *How does your and Nathan's story continue?*

Sean: We mark every one of his birthdays and talk about him often, both within our family and among close friends. And now, in God's timing, we can recognize the impact Nathan's life has had. For example, through the memorial service, a man committed to a faith relationship in Jesus.

Victoria: We'll always live with grief, but by God's grace, we have people to carry that burden with us—and help celebrate our son's beautiful life.



Care and Counseling Tips

THE BASICS

+ Death comes to your group. The death of a child.

A grieving father once asked how anyone could survive the thunderbolt that was the death of his child. For that father, and for so many who have lost a child, the painful answer is this: “We do survive—that’s the problem!”

While all death is difficult, the very nature of the death of a child is traumatic, and it’s a common understanding in grief literature that traumatic death is more difficult to grieve than non-traumatic death. It lasts longer and hurts more deeply.

Wally’s son was murdered in a botched computer store robbery. Fred was an innocent clerk who happened to recognize one of the thieves. Since that time, Wally has divided his own life into “the good time before Fred’s death and the bad time since.” The death has become the watershed of his life perspective. The normal acute phase for grief in the death of a child is *two to seven* years. The pain may not be as intense for the whole time, but it does linger intently. And the loss will stay with the parents for a lifetime.

Victoria died at age 98. She was somewhat of a recluse and had no known family. Her “valuables” were in a lockbox at the bank. They consisted of a worn teddy bear and a picture of her infant daughter who had died at age 1 some 80 years earlier.

It never goes away.



Care Tips

+ Come right away!

Don't assume someone else will go to the grieving parents—it's not always the case. As soon as you hear about the death, drop what you're doing, and go to the parents. Nothing shows love more than your presence.

+ Stay.

Parents in grief sometimes can't stand being in their own skin. Your willingness to sit with them is a promise of hope and love. Stay as long as you can, and when you have to leave, try to coordinate for someone else from your church or small group to be there. Be receptive to the parents' need to be alone, but don't leave until they request you do so. Stop by regularly—especially in the first few months after the tragedy.

+ Acknowledge that grief is physical.

Grief is as much a physical experience as an emotional one. Your friends will be exhausted, and yet they'll have trouble sleeping. Their immune system will be depleted—they may get more colds.

Encourage your friends to rest, to drink lots of water, and eat regularly. Bring the parents food or invite them to your house to share a meal.

+ Help with the little things.

Funeral arrangements. Death certificate. Calling family and friends. Notifying the school. All things that must be done...but overwhelming details for parents in grief. Help as you can.

Don't wait for your friends to ask for help.

Speak up. Talk directly to them. Wounded and grieving parents have little energy, and the fewer times they have to reach out for help, the better. Be there for them. Do they need a meal? Baby-sitting? A night out? Someone to clean their house? Make the offer.

+ Pray with them and for them.

Grieving parents may or may not be prepared to trust God. Don't judge them or preach at them. Be ready and willing to respond to their questions regarding faith and what you believe. In allowing them to speak up first, you let them set the pace, not you. In the meantime, offer simple prayers and reminders of God's presence.

+ Stick around.

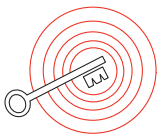
Grieving for a child is a process. Don't expect it to be over in a week, a month, a year. Continue to offer your support and love through the long haul—even when it seems as if they no longer need it. Grief for a child can resurface again and again in a lifetime. Make sure your friends know that they can call you when it happens.

WHEN TO REFER

It's always a good idea to refer a grieving parent to a professional grief counselor. Most parents will benefit from this experience, and it will help them move more quickly through the grieving process. However, in the following instances, it's *necessary* to seek professional help:

- + The person has stopped eating or sleeping.**
- + The person doesn't leave the home for an abnormal period of time.**
- + The person is unable to attend to surviving children.**
- + The person shows signs of suicidal intent (see *Chapter 4—Suicide*).**

A support group for grieving parents may also be a good option for your friends.



Counseling Tips

Most parents who lose a child will benefit from seeing a professional counselor. While the following counseling tips may help as you minister to your friends, don't hesitate to suggest they pursue a grief counselor as well.

+ Familiarize yourself with the stages of grief.

See *Chapter 2—The Death of a Spouse*. These stages, though usually present, are often stronger and more prolonged in the instance of a child's death. Don't expect your friends to go through the stages in a precise order—they may go back and forth or skip a stage. Support your friends during each stage of grief.

+ Don't judge your friends' denial or try to force reality on them.

Shock or numbness will usually follow the death of a child. This is a normal coping mechanism and shouldn't cause you to worry. The death of a child is a powerful emotional event. There's no way that most parents can quickly get their minds around this reality...and all the ramifications of it. Denial doesn't mean your friends don't "know" their child is dead—it simply means they can't immediately take in the full meaning of what has happened.

The best thing you can do for your friends during this stage is to simply be there. Be silent. Pray. Share in their laughter and tears. Hold them.

+ Be there during the hardest times.

Once the funeral is over, reality will start to set in, and your friends will have to face an unbearable pain. Most parents who lose a child will have a hard time sleeping, eating, and doing the everyday things that are necessary to survive. The pain is simply too overwhelming to function. Many

describe it as a pain within the chest and the gut or a longing in the head. One mother said it was as if her chest was always on fire and nothing would put out the flame.

During this phase, many grieving parents will look and search for their child. They'll walk into crowds with a keen, alert eye, hoping that maybe, just maybe, the child might be there. A fleeting glance, a similar body frame triggers a memory and a hope—maybe it didn't really happen; maybe it was a mistake.

During these times, it's critical that you be there for your friends...and that you don't judge them. Don't criticize them for an unclean house. Don't rush them through grief. Don't chastise them for holding on to hope.

Do encourage them to see a professional grief counselor during this time. Do offer to help them with the everyday chores and necessities. Do invite them to social functions. Do talk regularly with them about their child and the death.

+ Help parents feel normal in their abnormal situation.

The death of a child taxes all one's emotional resources. Nothing is normal. Many parents who have lost a child will say they feel as if they're "going crazy." Listen to their stories, and keep judgments to yourself. Some of the things they tell you may indeed seem crazy to you. But more than likely, they are *normal* and *expected* responses to the death of a child. There are parents who report sitting in the child's closet, smelling his clothes to capture "his smell." Other parents have worn a piece of their child's garments, talked regularly to their dead child, or followed another child into a store thinking that maybe it was their own child and there had been a "mix up." Convey an uncritical response to the grieving parent's stories and behavior. Short of committing a crime, almost any reaction of the bereaved is "normal." Parents hang on by a thread.

+ Talk with your friends about their marriage.

Even the most solid marriage can be seriously affected by the death of a child. Don't assume your friends' marriage is holding up perfectly under the pressure. Ask them how they're doing. Ask them if anything has changed between them. Encourage them to open up to one another with

their grief, emotions, and perspectives on the death. Many times grieving couples haven't addressed those topics with each other—and the longer they hold it in, the more distant they'll become from one another. You may also want to encourage your friends to see a marriage and/or a grief counselor.

+ Continue to support your friends through the long haul.

Even once your friends seem to be fine, it's important to continue your support. Regularly ask them how they're doing. Talk about the child and the death. Encourage them to continually seek God's comfort during the hard times. Send a card or note every year on the child's birthday to remind the parents that you're still thinking of them and praying for them.

SCRIPTURE HELP

These Scriptures can help you and your friends as you support them through the intense pain of losing a child.

+ Psalm 18:6

+ Psalm 31:9

+ Psalm 147:3

+ Matthew 26:36-38

+ John 13:34-35

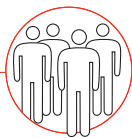
+ Romans 8:37-39

+ 2 Corinthians 4:8

+ 2 Corinthians 6:3-10

+ Philippians 1:6

+ 1 Peter 3:8



Group Tips

+ Be there in the beginning.

Pool your resources as a group to take care of the parents and family immediately following the death.

Have someone either with them or on call at all times—Encourage group members to sign up for certain times of day when they can call or stop by to comfort the family.

Take food—The parents won't be up to the task of cooking. Create a sign up sheet so group members (and other interested people in the church) can sign up to take food every night for at least the first two weeks after the death.

Meet practical needs—Do they need someone to drive their kids to school? to pick up extended family at the airport? to clean their house before or after the funeral? to go grocery shopping for them? to help with funeral arrangements? No detail is too small—your friends will be struggling with even the most basic tasks of everyday life. Be there to help them. Ask what they need.

+ Be there in the middle.

One of the most common complaints grieving parents have about their church community is that people were there in the beginning but dropped out of sight after a few weeks. Don't let that happen! The most difficult and painful times for grieving parents are in the weeks after the funeral.

Pray—Pray regularly for the family during your small group time, on your own, and with the family. Ask your friends if they have specific prayer requests. You may even want to create a prayer sign-up sheet for your group so you know that the family's requests are being prayed for regularly.

Let the family talk—One mother said, "If you want to clear a room fast, mention your child died!" Encourage a caring and supportive group atmosphere where your grieving friends can express their pain, can talk about their child, and can even state anger at God. Don't judge, preach at,

or hush the family—show empathy, compassion, and love as you listen to their hurt.

Continue offering help with the practical things—Ask regularly if there's anything the group can do for the family.

Be sure they keep coming—Don't let your friends disappear. Many grieving parents will withdraw from the church or small group. Don't let that happen! Continue pursuing your friends. Invite them to get-togethers, nights out, and other group or family functions.

+ There is no end...just keep being there.

Your friends will always feel pain. The grief of losing a child lasts a lifetime. Never shy away from talking about it with your friends. Never tell them to just move on. Instead, show your continued support through prayer, love, and thoughtful actions. Send cards on important days, such as the child's birthday or the anniversary of his or her death. Let the parents know you're still thinking about them and you'll be there for them if they ever need anything.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

+ Books

Klass, Dennis. *The Spiritual Lives of Bereaved Parents*. London: Brunner/Mazel, 1999.

Rando, Therese A. *Parental Loss of a Child*. Champaign, IL: Research Press, 1986.

Jorden, John C. *Spirituality and Loss*. Ashland: Ashland Theological Seminary Press, 2005.

+ Online Resources

www.compassionatefriends.org (The Compassionate Friends)



What Not to Say

+ **"God wanted your child with him."**

This kind of statement is a perfect example of how, in bad timing, the truth can be offensive. This can make parents feel that God is punishing them or angry with them.

+ **"Well, at least you have your other children."**

Similar to "You're still young; you can have more kids." Don't tie positive things to sorrow; they're completely unrelated, and one can't diminish the other or replace the emptiness. Recognize your friends' grief; don't try to take it away.

+ **"It's a blessing that it happened now instead of later."**

Don't try to give hurting people something to feel "grateful" for. Besides, time and age have no effect on the impact this loss has. (Same with: "Oh, it happened a long time ago, you should be over it by now.")

+ **"Everything happens for a reason; God will work this out for good."**

This will sound like a meaningless and pat reminder—especially when given soon after a death. It's normal to lose trust and to experience violent grief—so to try to prevent your friends' grief process or push them more quickly through what God's doing is unnecessary and can actually be more harmful.



What to Say

+ **"I care about you and am praying for you."**

People have all kinds of different coping mechanisms, so don't expect people to handle loss one certain way. Give your friends the freedom

to cope in their own way without trying to impart spiritual principles (no matter how true!). Let God work, and wait for the right time to give his words of wisdom.

+ “I don’t know what to say. But please know that I’m here for you, whatever you need.”

It’s OK not to know what to say. Just being present means more than anything else. Be available, be a listener, and be a friend.

+ “What do you need today that I can do for you?”

Remember that, for your friends, normal time ceases to exist. Their schedule does not follow yours. So they may welcome a phone call or meal in the middle of the night.

And never assume someone else in the church or small group is taking the lead in the support efforts. Be the first to pursue your friends with tenderness, immediate help, and loving service—a cup of coffee around the clock, money for a tank of gas, an offer to baby-sit.

+ “Tell me about your child.”

Sure, you don’t want to make your friends cry, but the truth is they’re going to cry anyway. What your friends may need is to have someone cry with them—so don’t be scared of their tears. Go through it with them, let them stay for a bit in their grief, and don’t try to help them move ahead before they’re ready.

Say their child’s name. If your friends don’t want to talk about him or her, they’ll let you know. But if they do, it might be one of the most powerful moments you could be a part of.

+ “How is your marriage doing?”

Don’t expect your friends to know how to maneuver through marriage after such a massive blow. Ask how they’re holding up together, and offer to help.

Parents who’ve experienced a child’s death need emotional and spiritual support more than any words of counsel. Get into the hurt with them—listen, care, pray, and love.



THIS IS A SAMPLE

The number of pages is limited.

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