

BEREAVED PARENTS coping with hatred

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Is there someone you hate because of your child's death? Who is it? Is there a name that comes to mind? Perhaps just saying the name is enough to make you sick. Or it may be that you hate some unknown person or force that contributed to the death of your child. In this article I'm not going to tell you to let your hatred go. Instead I'm going to share with you brief stories of parents who attend bereavement support meetings of The Compassionate Friends (TCF). These parents have coped—and are coping—with hatred.

What is your answer to the question: Why do you hate this person? It is likely for one of two reasons:

you hate them for something they did—or for something they didn't do.

As you read these words, you are likely thinking of the situations that have contributed to the hatred you feel. You may be tempted to put down this article. But something keeps you reading. You may feel that hating someone is a waste of time, but you may also feel that you have good reasons for it. How long have you carried this hatred? Has it decreased since your child died?

I want you to visualize your brain and see it as it consists of billions of cells. Now, see a couple thousand of those cells labeled "hate." Next, see something, such as the face of a person responsible for your child's death and observe how it triggers those cells. Immediately a chain-reaction takes place, causing all the "hate" cells to respond at once. You are immediately hit with several of the negative events that have happened in your life, with all the accompanying emotions. This occurs so automatically that it seems to be outside of your control. The first step in putting it back into your control is recognizing its presence. The second step is finding ways to cope with your hatred.

In writing this article I contacted some of the TCF bereaved parents I know and said, "I've been asked to write a TCF magazine article on coping with hatred. What should I say?" The first question I asked was, "What is related to your hatred?" Here are some of the answers.

I FELT POWERLESS

Part of your hate may be because you feel that your child's death has left you completely powerless. Prior to the death you may have thought that your life was pretty much in your control. Now, the futility of life may eat at you. You may feel that the only person you are hurting is yourself (which is usually not the case—often other people in our lives are affected by the hatred we carry), but you may not care. For you it may not be hatred that you feel so much as anger. The death of your child isn't fair. You don't want to be going through this. Some deaths can't be blamed on one person or any one thing. This causes more frustration. One parent described it "like hitting a cloud—I wanted something to hate, but nothing tangible was there."

I DIDN'T HAVE ALL THE INFORMATION

One mother, whose son was killed by a driver, didn't know who the driver was for the first couple weeks. She stated:

I would be driving and see kids driving and ask, "Is it you? Why did you do it?" He was everybody. Then, he was nobody and that's too much hatred for any one person. Then someone gave me a picture of him. My husband didn't want to see it. But, I had to put a face to it. It didn't make it okay, but it helped.

I WANTED THE PERSON(S) RESPONSIBLE TO HURT

Perhaps you've heard someone say, "I will never forgive that person because they took the life of my child." or "I hate the doctors because they let her die."

Parents may say they hate the police, the criminal justice system, or the government because of the lack of performance. When our lives have pain and suffering due to someone's volition or negligence, we want them to feel pain and suffering. The mother in the above example told the following story:

One night I waited until my husband went to bed and at 12:30 I went to the boy's neighborhood. I wanted to see how someone could walk around in life after he did such a terrible thing. I wanted to just see someone walk in front of the window. I wanted to say to him, "I just hate you" and put my hands around his neck. I knew I couldn't and I drove home and when I told my husband, he made me promise I would not go again. We went to a lawyer because we wanted this kid to be responsible and the lawyer told us that the boy would say it was an accident.

BECAUSE I WAS SO CONSUMED BY PAIN AND SUFFERING, I JUST DIDN'T CARE.

One father told me how the death of his son made him so angry that he didn't care what happened to him or anyone else:

I wanted anything that would set me off. I just wanted someone to cut me off—to pick a fight. I chased a lot of people on the freeway. I had such a confusion of emotions. In one second, you're a dangerous person to be around. Nothing has ever prepared you for this. It's got to be someone's fault.

MANY OF THE PEOPLE AROUND ME DIDN'T UNDERSTAND THE PAIN OF MY GRIEF.

Swirling in the emotion of hate is confusion and anger that occurs when people, who you thought were your friends, blurt out hurtful words. One friend of the father in the above example said something that greatly angered him:

That's too bad. Your son was just at the wrong place at the wrong time.

The second question I asked was, "What helped you with your hatred?" All parents said that they eventually came to the realization that talking it out was helpful. The parents I spoke with all agreed that they didn't actually *perform* any one action that reduced their hatred, but rather found ways to admit it to themselves and others, talk about it, listen to others cope with their hatred, and get to a point where enough time had passed to give them some degree of perspective on their child's death.

RECOGNIZING THAT MY CHILD IS TOO VALUABLE

Several months after her son died in an auto accident a mother came to the following realization:

My son was too valuable and too important and I had all these negative feelings I was associating with him and that was bad. I came to realize that if I did anything with his memory, it had to be positive."

Later in our conversation, this mother restated her valuable advice:

In time it happened that thinking about the good times with my son was a contradiction to all my thoughts of hatred and I had to decide which way to go. In addition, I still had a family and they had to know that they are important and loved and they need our energy invested in them. There was no doubt that every one of us loved my son, but I had to remember that they lost a brother and it was important for them to know that I also loved them.

COMING TO THE REALIZATION THAT I MAY NEVER KNOW THE WHOLE STORY

The potential for hatred is increased when the events surrounding the death of a child are unclear. In thinking back on the car accident that killed her son, a mother stated:

I came to the conclusion that I'll never know the whole story [of who ran him off the road]. A year and a half after the accident I went back to the medical examiner's office and discovered that, with my son's injuries and the fact that someone [unknown] called in the accident from a nearby phone, he would have died even if the accident had occurred right in front of the hospital. Yet, I still have a million whys and, at some point in time, you have to let it go.

MEETING OTHER PARENTS

Again, all the parents agreed that talking with and listening to other bereaved parents was a powerful experience. One father noted:

You go through all these ups and downs—after a while you feel that you’re nuts, mixed up. We accepted an invitation to a TCF meeting. Our whole world was falling apart. When we walked in, these people looked so normal. We were greeted as equals. The words they said weren’t offensive. We listened to stories and realized these people were feeling what we did.

A mother stated:

TCF helped me fill the gap of hatred by comforting me in a way no one else could. When someone knows how deep the hurt is, that comfort can push out the hatred.

EXPERIENCING THE POWER OF TOUCH

Not everyone likes to be touched. Those who do often report the positive feelings they receive from a physical display of affection and caring. The mother who wanted to harm the boy who she felt killed her son shared with me a powerful moment that took place at one of her first TCF meetings:

When this mother hugged me—from her body to mine—it said, “I know what you’ve been through.” From that moment we became one.

PUTTING MY HATRED ON THE SHELF

Some parents may never totally get rid of their hatred. Advice from a mother may help:

I found after a while that I could put the hatred on a shelf—I could get it whenever I needed to. [For example] I hated the family for never saying they were sorry—just the mother calling and saying those words. I just put hatred somewhere and go back to it at times.

PEOPLE LISTENING WITHOUT JUDGMENT

My minister helped me. So did my friends. However, until I talked to people at TCF I thought I was losing my mind.

In this article I’ve asked you some difficult questions. The fact that you chose to continue reading indicates that you are motivated to learn more about hatred and what parents have done to cope with it. Good for you. Let’s finish with one more question:

What would your child say to you about any
of the hatred you’ve been carrying?

You know the answer. Now it’s up to you to decide. I know that the parents who lovingly shared their stories hope that their experiences help you at this difficult time in your life.