

THE UNEXPLAINED DEATH of a child

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OUR BRAIN IS DOING THE BEST IT CAN

Trauma. A frightening word, especially for anyone who's experienced it. Traumatic Death is even more frightening. How does a family cope with this?

The brain is an amazing thing. More than ten billion cells work together to keep us alive and moving. You may have read this before in my other articles: I believe that the brain has two major functions.

- ✓ First and foremost is to protect itself and the body around it from pain—any type of pain: physical, mental, emotional, spiritual.
- ✓ The second major function is to make sense of the world around it. As you read this article, your brain is trying to make sense of what these words are saying to you. Your brain is seeking meaning.

Given these two major functions, consider what a traumatic event does. It causes pain and is often without meaning.

Next add *death* to the formula. And then add *unexplained*.

The brain cannot grasp a sudden, unexplained trauma. Finally, add *child* to this horrendous alignment of words: traumatic, sudden, unexplained death of a child.

The brain and all the brains of everyone who knows the grieving family
and their precious child are left to try to understand
this senseless, unexplainable, horror.

Our brain hates pain—unless it can understand a good reason for it—such as putting up with an exercise regimen or studying a boring subject. I don't have to tell you that grief is very painful. The brain wants to understand it and will turn it over and over in an attempt to do so. Researchers on sleep have found that,

even during deep sleep, the brain is working, processing, and consolidating the day's events—or should I say *attempting* to do so. The death of a child is horrible and the brain has likely never come close to experiencing that much pain. It is a pain that, while subsiding over time, lasts a lifetime. The brain “knows” that humans die. But, within seconds of learning of their child's death, the parents' brain has requested—no **demand**—to begin to know why? Why? WHY?

With no clear answer their brain has shifted into a frenzy of attempts to make sense, at least *some* sense of the fact that their child died.

Next, they become hypervigilant to any clue, any hint of what could have contributed to the death of their child. They comb through the medical examiner's report, the doctor's notes, the Internet looking for something—anything that can begin to ease the demand that their brain has for answers. One way to understand the search is to think of the categories of possible contributing factors such as: genetic, biological, environmental, and spiritual. Let's briefly consider each.

GENETICS

There must a hidden genetic defect that one or both parents transmitted. So, what do they do? They look into their family tree and, of course, find something. They may not have considered the fact that we all would find *something*. Is this *something* significant enough to contribute to the death of a child? Their brain turns this over in thousands of different ways and may even come up with its own hypothesis—one not shared by the experts. Yet, they wonder....

BIOLOGICAL

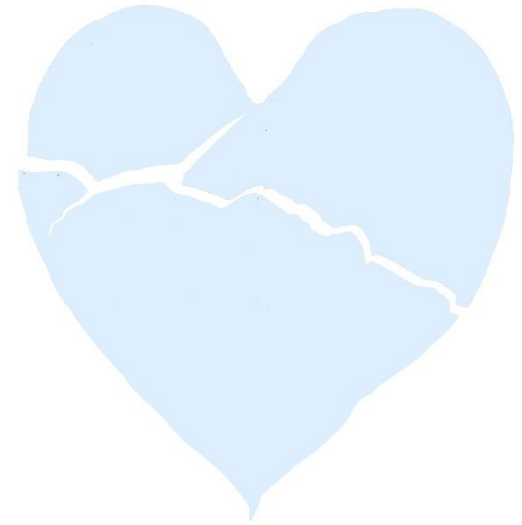
Is there something they gave or failed to give to their child? Food? Medication? Inoculation? Perhaps their brain has convinced them that it's something they did to their body years ago that was somehow transmitted to their child. Drugs are common culprits that their brain settles on, especially illegal drugs. Their brain doesn't need much nudging to take them back to the time(s) they took an illegal drug. Remember, despite the fact that hundreds of studies have shown that drugs taken years ago have no effect on offspring, their brain doesn't care. In its incessant demand to make sense of its world, the drug hypothesis provides some relief. The biggest problem with this is, that no matter what people say, their brain will grab on to any possible reason. What do they get out of it? A sense of relief? Hardly. Instead they get what most people get when a child dies for any reason: Guilt. If they have kept this “reason” a secret, I call this Unmentionable Guilt. Their brain has “found” the problem—and it's them!

ENVIRONMENTAL

The Medical Examiner is the expert in determining the cause of death. But in the case of their child, no clear evidence emerged. Unlike hundreds of other investigations, no conclusion is reached in what caused this child to die. Why? Again, their brain finds a way to create its own answer. For example, Maybe, the Medical Examiner missed something. Suffocation? Disease? An animal? Toxins?

SPIRITUAL

Did God do this? Again, their brains scan their past, looking for evidence and, of course, there it is! They did some bad things when they were younger. Only they know what they are. If they have a belief in God, it doesn't take much for their brain to connect two events: the terrible thing they did years ago somehow must have been a contributing factor that God would let their child die. This is another type of guilt called Moral Guilt. Again, their brain has taken the senseless death of their child and made it less so.



Do any of the above examples resonate with you? Have you heard or seen a parent do this? Don't blame their brain. It's only doing its job. During the years following the death of a child, the parents' brain will perhaps test hundreds of hypotheses about the cause, turning each one over and over, inspecting each one inside out and upside down. My hope in writing this article is that you will realize that what the brain has been doing is *normal*. It must go through these investigations again and again and again, until it doesn't need to anymore. Therefore, for someone to tell a parent to "Stop thinking that way" is the same thing as saying, "Don't think."

I've met hundreds and hundreds of parents whose children have died, some with unknown causes. So, I guess I'm asking you to trust me when I say the following:

If you know a parent whose thoughts are disrupting their ability to accomplish activities of daily living, help them find help: Encourage the parents to join a support group, talk to another parent who has been coping with this longer than them, or seek a counselor who understands bereaved parents. As the years go on, they will never forget their child; but their brain will gradually get to a point where it doesn't need to ask *Why?* as often. And finally, remind them be good to their brain. It's doing the best that it can.