A Q & A Between a Mother Whose Son Died At 21 Unexpectedly 10 Years Ago, Who Has Not Done Much to Get Grief Support Over the Years

Am I going crazy?
To address your question “Am I going crazy?” the answer is no, you are not, although I understand how you might feel as if you are sometimes. We have all felt that. You are grieving normally and naturally, given your circumstances and lack of physical grief support, such as private counseling by a true grief expert or regularly attending a grief group with other parents who get it.

I'm still having a hard time understanding why.
After ten years, I wonder if the question you ask of “Why?” is still a true/real question or one that you find yourself, as when you are in disbelief that he is actually gone from this world, asking as a more generalized question, still trying to understand how such a thing could have happened so quickly—like, one minute your son was here and fine, and the next he was gone. So there is the “I really do not understand why, even though it’s been ten years,” and there is the, “Sometimes I can’t believe it could have really happened and sometimes I still wonder why,” that kind of why or how. We do this because we are trying to make sense of how someone can be so alive one minute and just gone the next, and especially when this is our child! That’s the big question, especially in those first few years. Why? Why me? Why my son? What happened? How could this happen? What did I miss? What if I had seen something beforehand, might I have saved him? We call them the woulda, coulda, shouldas. We all go through them.

So what I am saying is that there is the “big” why in the first few years—that’s the why that we need to find the answer to that works for us. Some people eventually realize that there simply is no answer to that question, and they finally accept that they will never know. Some people actually know why because of the nature of how their child died. And some people come up with their own answer to that question, such as someone religious or spiritual who might decide that it was God who took their child home because it was his time. For me, with Erika having cancer, I eventually came to my own answer that works for me, and that is that our bodies are fragile, we are all going to die one day, none of us knowing when, and Erika happened to get an extremely aggressive form of cancer that no treatment nor her own body could stop. Cancer ended Erika’s life. A disease won her body. That works for me. You have to find the answer that works for you, even if you may never know the real why, which means coming to a place of saying, “Okay, there is no rational explanation for what happened to my son, and that’s the mystery I will learn to live with.” We want to know these answers so that we feel as if we have some control over our lives. When a child dies--the person we feel is supposed to out-survive us and that we need to make sure is always okay--we realize that we can’t save our children from everything. Plus, it turns our own world into one of realizing how little control we really do have. If we are asked to simply embrace the “mystery” of not ever knowing, that means we can’t put this horrific thing that happened into a nice neat box of understanding that makes sense to us. Yet there are many things that make no sense and never will. You need to truly find an answer and let that be what you learn to live with because it will give you one less thing to be having to constantly grapple with. Your challenge as the mother left behind is to live life as fully as possible, embrace the life you have left, or maybe even tell yourself that you will live the you’re
your son did not get to live. All of these things are issues each one of us to grapple with and each one of us has to find our own way of dealing with.

When I work with people who still have the big why question after so long, I realize that perhaps they haven’t had the proper guidance to help them along their journey or perhaps they so desperately want a definitive answer where there is none. This is painful and very challenging, I know. Perhaps you might make this more of an actual goal that you will reach: What is “my” answer to why this happened to my son?

My life hasn't been the same. I haven't been the same (and never will be).

Any major life-changing experience changes not only who we are, but also our lives. Think about something on a different scale than death, such as a divorce, auto immune illness, loss of a home, etc. All of those experiences are also life changing and throw those involved into a new reality, or as we call it that “new normal.” The death of a child does this in a major way. Your son is no longer here in this world. Each one of us experiences a major transformation from who we were before our child died to who we become after. That is a major transformation, and that transformation takes a lot of time. In the process, we go through many different experiences about life, death, what matters, and who we are without our child in this world. For instance, it’s been 17 years since Erika died, and I have done everything humanly possible to deal with my grief and create a new and meaningful life. My days are filled with that meaning and purpose, and I have created a special group of friends so that I can have the best life I can, considering that I will always live with the death of Erika and always miss her. In fact, on my birthday this year, I cried the entire day because I missed her so much. That hasn’t happened in years, but there it was, 17 years later, so unexpectedly.

This is how grief goes. It’s not linear, but rather like a roller coaster ride or an unwound ball of twine all messed up. Sometimes it makes sense, such as a specific trigger that upsets us, and sometimes it doesn’t at all—sometimes it just comes and simply “is.” Then what do we do? We need to sit with it. Don’t fight it. It will wash through us and eventually subside again. It’s cleansing and healing. Imagine it as a cleanse, washing through. Treat it like a friend, not something to get rid of, because it is your friend. The important thing is that you need to give your grief a voice—which means, a way to be expressed and dealt with. Everyone does that differently: write, read, see a movie, take a walk, talk to another parent or trusted friend, exercise, surround yourself with people who have their values in line with yours, go to a group, find a good grief counselor, paint, write a poem, work in the garden, and the list goes on and on. Maybe there will be times when you are hit hard by the grief such that you need to lie down and just be in that cocoon of safety and love. I’ve done probably all of those at one time or another.

I just feel like no one truly understands what I'm feeling and going through.

No one can truly understand what you are going through because only you had the relationship with your son. Your relationship together was unique to only the two of you. Yet there are millions of other moms and dads out there, like me, who understand the pain and sorrow and longevity of this grief that is like yours. It is a journey, not the flu and something you eventually get over. One thing that is true is that most parents do experience many of the same feelings you have (see the attached normal grief reactions), which means you are not alone because, although the child who died may be different, the commonality of the reactions we all have are the same or similar. That is why grief groups are so powerful, but you have to attend them regularly to truly hear the stories that others share about what they are going through, how they are handling those things, and what works and doesn’t work. That’s why not even another
grieving parent can say, “I know how you feel,” because we can never truly know how anyone else feels. But, and that’s a big but, in my work with thousands of grieving parents, I can tell you that each and every one of them DOES understand what it’s like to lose a child, and they are just as devastated and confused as you, and they ask all of those questions you asked, and they go through many of the exact same things as you. I would encourage you to change the words you use and instead of saying “No one truly understands how I feel or what I’m going through” say “I’m not alone because, although they don’t know my son, they are also feeling, thinking, and experiencing the same things as I am.” Changing the narrative changes the brain and helps you know that you are truly not alone. To say no one else understands isolates you and makes you feel alone, and it’s not really true. So to change the narrative in your head from one that is isolating and hopeless and lonely to one that is inclusive and filled with support and hope is much more accurate and will give you the knowledge and experience that you are not alone and that you just have to find those people and share with them.

I'm the only one who even remembers him

As to remembering your son, it’s one of the hardest parts for us as the years go by, and that is that people stop talking about our child and our friends’ children move on and grow up and have lives and ours doesn’t, and our children are forever the age they were when they died with no new memories for us to share with others. However, that means it is our job to make sure our children’s memories and names are never forgotten in the hearts and minds of those in our families, with our friends, and others we meet as we go through life. That’s where we come in.

What things do you do to make sure your son is remembered? Sometimes all it takes is bringing up his name in casual conversation with someone who is talking about something and you remember, “My son loved to do that, too.” If you make a point not to say anything about him, then others will follow suit. Or if you do say something and everyone goes quiet, you can lovingly say, “I’m not sure why everyone went quiet when I talked about my son, but I want you to know how much I love hearing his name and knowing that he is not forgotten.” After all, death ends a person’s life here, but the love we have for someone never dies. We are and always will be their parents.

Last, you asked about other things to do. I will see that we send you a free grief pin (see the attached card), along with our documentary film, Portraits of Hope: The Parent’s Journey, which I know will be of help to you. Please watch and share the video. It’s filled with so much great information about losing a child. Also, there are some really good and helpful books. Check out the attached document with recommended books. If you haven’t read it, the one I would recommend is The Worst Loss by Barbara Rosoff. If you want a spiritual book that is really good about people who have had near-death experiences and come back to tell about them, the one I like the best is Lessons from the Light by Dr. Kenneth Ring. Last, as for groups in your area, the only groups I know of would be Compassionate Friends (each group is different, so if you try one and it doesn’t resonate for you, try another one) and Bereaved Parents of the USA. You’ll have to check both websites for a group near you. Since you live in Sonoma, it’s only a short plane ride or car ride to come to one of our yearly events in Pacific Palisades, Los Angeles. Plus, we have put you on the mailing list now, so you’ll receive information about workshops you can attend. If you do find yourself in the Los Angeles area, check our online calendar to know the drop-in group dates as well.

We are always here for you.
From Our Hearts to Yours,
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