Navigating Mother's & Father's Day: A Guide for Bereaved Parents

Celebrations can be difficult for bereaved families, and days like Mother's Day and Father's Day can be particularly challenging. These days celebrate parenthood and family, and this can intensify feelings of grief when your child has died. This guide aims to help you navigate these significant days while honouring your grief and caring for your wellbeing.

Understanding Your Emotions

It's normal to experience a wide range of emotions, both in the run-up to these days and on the day itself. This is normal, and a natural part of grief. You may feel:

Sadness: Missing your child and the celebrations you should have shared together
Anxiety: Worrying about how you'll cope with the day and handle others' celebrations and reactions
Anger or frustration: Feelings about the unfairness of your loss, especially when surrounded by others' celebrations.
Guilt: Complex feelings about wanting to enjoy the day, celebrate with your living children and celebrate your own parents.
Comfort and validation: Being able to celebrate your parenthood and the bond you have with your child

It's important to give yourself permission to experience these feelings and remember that emotions may be heightened around Mother's and Father's Day.

Deciding How to Approach the Day

Some bereaved parents will choose not to celebrate difficult days like Mother & Father's Days, whereas others will find comfort in celebrating their parenthood and the bond with their child. It is important to reflect on what feels right for you and take a moment to consider what feels most comfortable for you this year. You may decide to participate in Mother's and Father's Day, just one, or none of these celebrations. You can also change how you celebrate each year if your preferences change, or if you want to try something new.

Communicating your needs and letting friends and family know how you're feeling and what you need will help them provide you with the best support. Let them know if you prefer to keep to yourselves on special days, if you'd like them to check in or if you need their support, such as if you'd appreciate them doing something special to honour your child's memory.

Remember that grief can change day by day. Give yourself the freedom to adapt your plans. If something feels too difficult, it's okay to step back and take time for yourself. Likewise, you can choose to join in or make plans at the last minute.

Planning for the Day

Planning ahead can help to ease some of the difficult emotions surrounding the day and help you to feel more prepared. These preparations can include:

- Deciding in advance how you want to spend the day
- Many companies will give you the option of unsubscribing from Mother's and Father's Day emails without removing yourself from your usual mailing lists. It can be helpful to do this to avoid triggering email reminders
- Having a social media break in the week running up to the day. If you would like to post on social media to honour your child or your own parent on Mother's or Father's Day you could schedule a post to go out at a set time or ask a friend or family member to post on your behalf
- Choosing a different day to celebrate. Presents and celebrations can be done before or after the day itself
- Having a backup plan if your original intentions feel too overwhelming
- Celebrating Bereaved Parent's Day instead on the 3rd July, International Bereaved Mother's Day on the first Sunday in May and/or International Bereaved Father's Day on the last Sunday of August

Ways to Honour Your Child

Many bereaved parents find comfort in finding a way to honour their child on meaningful days such as Mother's and Father's Day. Below are some ideas of ways you could include your child:

- Visiting a special place that reminds you of your child
- Receiving a card or gift from your child, bought by a friend or relative
- Planting something in their memory that you can watch grow throughout the year
- Looking through their memory box or an album of their pictures
- Lighting a candle in memory of them wherever you decide to spend the day

Supporting Your Partner

If you have a partner, remember that they may experience these days differently. However you choose to celebrate your special day, it does not mean that they will feel the same way about their day, or about celebrating with their own parents. In these situations, it is important to talk openly about your individual needs and feelings to ensure that you can be supportive and supported by each other. Consider whether you want to spend the day together or have some time alone, and remember to be patient with each other if you have different ways of coping.

Looking After Your Mental Health

Taking care of yourself is especially important during these challenging days. Eating and drinking properly, even if you don't feel like it is essential to maintaining your wellbeing.

Give yourself permission to rest and plan gentle activities that you will enjoy. Navigating the emotions of days like Mother's and Father's Day can be difficult and it's important to seek support when needed:

- **Join a Support Group:** Connecting with other bereaved parents who understand your pain can provide comfort and validation. Tiny Tickers offer monthly bereavement support groups through Zoom, led by a qualified facilitator.
- **Professional Counselling:** Consider seeking help from a grief counsellor or therapist who specialises in loss. They can offer guidance and coping strategies tailored to your needs.
- **Lean on Loved Ones:** Don't hesitate to reach out to friends and family who can provide a listening ear, a shoulder to cry on, or simply companionship during difficult times.

Remember that asking for help is a sign of strength, not weakness.

Celebrating With Other Children

When you have other children, the emotions surrounding Mother's and Father's Days can become even more complex. The desire to celebrate with your living children whilst wanting to remember your child who has died can feel very conflicting.

There is no right or wrong way to spend the day. If your children are old enough to understand, it can be helpful to share how you are feeling with them and also to ask them to include their sibling who died in any celebrations if that would bring you comfort. It's important to be honest with your children and to let them see you cry or be sad if this is how you feel, as this models healthy grieving.

Final Thoughts

Mother's Day and Father's Day may always bring complex emotions, and that's okay. There's no time limit on grief. Each year may feel different, and what helps one year might not be right for you the next. As a parent, your love for your child continues. How you choose to acknowledge or spend these days is a personal choice, and whatever feels right for you is valid. Take each moment as it comes, be gentle with yourself, and know that it's okay to both grieve and celebrate your parenthood and the bond you have with your child in whatever way feels right for you.

Other resources

The Tiny Tickers Facebook support group for bereaved heart parents is a supportive and understanding community of those who understand the loss of a child. We welcome you to join **here.**

Our website contains information and advice on navigating loss **here.**

As part of our Family Experience video series, parents discuss their experiences of dealing with bereavement. Watch the video **here**.

Many bereaved parents find comfort in creating an online tribute page after losing a child. This space, like an online memory box, can be filled with memories (photos, music and videos) and shared with family and friends. You can also light candles, write messages and give gifts. It is possible to use this page to fundraise in memory of your child, but this is by no means obligatory. You can create your free tribute page **here**.