

## **Bereaved Families of Cape Breton**

# **Death Ended Your Child's Life But Not His or Her Relationship to the Family**

By Nancy S. Hogan, RN, PhD

In 1983, I wrote a two-part article for the newsletter called "Commitment to Survival" in which I described parent bereavement as a complex process that includes mothers and fathers maintaining a relationship with their dead child. Specifically, I wrote, "Death ended your child's life but not his or her relationship to the family" and "You give up the old person who was physically connected to a now deceased child and make different connections with your child who has died."

I received many letters describing how bereaved parents had been criticized and even ridiculed by others for expressing their continued love and connection to their dead child. You told me you copied the articles and sent them to friends, relatives, and people at your work place to let them know that it was "normal" to want to talk about your child. You also told me that in your opinion, maintaining a sacred bond to your dead child was vital to your well-being.

From 1983 to the present I have conducted a number of studies with both bereaved parents and siblings. Findings from these studies indicate the ongoing connection you have to your dead child is a catalyst and an enduring energy which sustains one through the most intense time of grief and gives survivors the courage to face losses that bereaved parents and their living children must endure. The deep pain of grief comes with a deep introspective searching for answers to agonizing questions about why your child's death had to be a part of your life and about your shattered dreams.

Research shows that this period of grief is characterized by feelings of hopelessness, profound sadness, aching loneliness and a belief that you will not and cannot ever be happy again. Physical reactions may include fast heartbeats. Shortness of breath, and a sense of fear or panic that more bad things will happen to other loved ones. Many bereaved parents expressed feeling angry, blaming yourself and others for your child's death. You spoke of being preoccupied with endless thoughts and feelings about the circumstances surrounding his or her death and the difficulty of coping and adapting to your new, permanently changed lives. You said that this was a time of "feeling confusion about who you were, not knowing yourself anymore and feeling detached from others" and how these thoughts and feelings demanded and used up the little bit of energy you had each morning.

Grief work is infinitely private, painful work. Part of you died with your child and now you must struggle with letting go of your old self as you endure the unknown of who you will become. One newly bereaved parent describes this process by saying, "I liked who I was before my child died. I don't like who I am now. I barely know myself."

In the beginning of grief you were consumed with the myriad of reminders of your child's life and death. As time passed, you found occasional peaceful

respite from grief as the episodes of deep grieving became less frequent and intense. Finally, you described knowing you were having more good days than bad. This marked the beginning of leaving behind some of the suffering and sorrow of intense grief and having the energy available for keeping and cherishing the love and connection you have to your dead child. Surviving the struggle with death and finding life again renews energy and is manifest in your becoming stronger and better able to cope with your loss. You gain a realization of having become more tolerant of yourself and others, feeling more compassion for others and becoming a more forgiving person. Measures of happiness and hope become a part of your life again.

The hardest work of becoming a survivor is learning to live without the physical presence of your dead child while simultaneously learning to live with her or her emotional and spiritual presence. You find that meaning in your life is derived from your relationships to those you love, including your dead child. The legacy your child has left is a love that transcends time and space.