

Excerpt from *This is Not Goodbye: A Holistic Guide to Help Grieving Children*

By Christine Sandor



I had already notified the schools that the children’s father was to be taken off life-support that Friday, so I decided to keep them home despite the schedule change. Martin was heading into court at 2:00 p.m. that day to request that the judge approve the extubation and sign a DNR. While Harold’s two adult children were not going to argue their grandmother’s choice and agreed that it should all take place, the issue at hand was that my children were all minors. Because I was divorced from their father, the court would have to consider whether I could agree and/or not agree on their behalf. The court was acting in the children’s best interest. In my opinion, the law had gotten way too complicated. While I understood, I was frustrated that as their mother I might be seen as someone who was not the right person to decide for my children, simply because their father and I were no longer in a marriage. If there was any doubt about the prognosis, the judge might order that a guardian *ad-litem* be appointed. That person would have to go into the hospital, review all the medical data, discuss the situation with the doctors, and so on. Since it was already 2:00 p.m. on a Friday, it was a sure bet that any investigation would not happen until the following week. Martin hoped the judge would just accept my statement on behalf of my children, and that I would not oppose the decision. How could any of us object? I knew in my heart that Harold would not want to remain in a body that he could not truly *live* in. As scared as I think he was of dying, I believed that he would not make the choice to remain alive in a lifeless body. Another whole part of me believed he was already halfway gone. I was reminded of a picture my son Jacob had drawn of the world, the moon, and the universe around it. In between the moon and world he had drawn a person, hovering between time and space and the universe. He gave it to me saying, “That is where I think Daddy is right now.” I knew he was right.

During the day on Friday, I occupied the kids with spring cleaning for the better part of the very rainy day. I found myself watching the clock. If this went through, it might mean a fast trip to Boston in the pouring rain. When Annie called, it was a few minutes before three. She told me the judge had signed the DNR and the extubation would be done at four o’clock. One hour. That was just about how long it took me to drive into Boston on a good day! I hung up and told the kids to get their shoes on. To my horror, I would have to explain things in the car, with no Sophie, no older half-sister—just me and three very scared kids on a rain-soaked highway. Once again, plan as I might, things would take their own course. I took a deep breath as I ushered the children through the puddles to the car, and once again went to the center of my being for the words I would need.

The Professional Perspective

When dealing with a dying loved one, it's important to prepare the child for what is about to happen.

Preparation for discussing imminent death truly begins well before you are faced with having to tell children about the pending death or death of a loved one. If you have had the time, for instance during a terminal illness, you can begin talking about what happens to someone at the time of death, and the meaning death will have for both the person dying and those who are left behind. While always keeping in mind the age-appropriateness of what you are sharing, it remains your task to be honest with your children.

The hardest question we must answer is when a child looks up and asks if the family member is going to die. Being clear in your response goes beyond saying yes or no. While we may not know for sure if recovery is possible, it is okay to share that information in similar words similar to say, "We can't know for sure, but the doctors have told us that it looks like he/she will die."

Often the next question may be, "When?" Again, honesty is always best. No one knows the exact moment of death for anyone, and we can honestly say we do not know. The next step is to be prepared for the flood of feelings and emotions the child will experience, from anger to guilt. J. William Worden writes in his book *How We Can Help Bereaved Children*: "...children may wonder, 'Did I cause it to happen?' These children need to know that they did not cause the death out of anger or shortcomings. Children learn early that strong feelings can hurt another person... Could the feelings (they) have contributed to the death? This question may well be on the minds of some children."

Children need to know that they are in no way to blame for the death of a loved one.

The most important message for the child is that they are, and their behavior is, in NO way responsible for the passing of someone they love. Younger children, for instance, will go to "magical thinking" most of the time. It is natural and normal for them to begin thinking that perhaps if they believe hard enough, clap their hands, or be really good, the person they love will be okay. We walk a fine line when dealing with "magical thoughts" and bargaining with children. Comprehending that someone they love is no longer there, whether or not the death is sudden or they have had preparation time, can lead to a sense of abandonment. This means it is essential that they understand nothing was their fault. It is human nature to search for a reason for the events in our lives, especially the not-so-pleasant ones. Adults will even begin to wonder whether, if they had done something differently, this would have happened. Children are perhaps more vulnerable to these feelings of blame, as they do not yet have the reasoning skills to understand that other events have a role in certain outcomes. Because of their limited ability to reason and limited frame of reference, children will normally determine that the only one to blame for the tragedy is themselves. Telling the child it was not their fault is the starting point. It is important to be attentive both to what the child is saying and not saying. Worden reminds us that "children have fears, fantasies, and questions and need a person who will hear them out and not minimize their concerns." Worden reminds us that "children have fears, fantasies, and questions, and need a person who will hear them out and not minimize their concerns."

Not minimizing their feelings and concerns is of the utmost importance. The feelings and emotions are theirs, and they have every right to feel them. It is vital, however, that you as the caregiver provide some clarity around these concerns. Offering other "reasons" is not always easy, and often "reasons" cannot be pinpointed.

Helping a child to see how their words and actions could not have been the cause for the outcome will help them take the blame off of themselves.

Be prepared for the unexpected.

The death of a loved one, whether sudden or not, is hard to deal with for any of us. The unexpected can really throw us off. You can plan all you like, but life might still throw you a curve ball! “Regardless of how it occurs, the death of a loved one is shocking, painful, and seemingly impossible to accept... Our loss is compounded by our characteristic human difficulty in separating from one another.” (Tatelbaum, 1980)

I had no intention of being in a car trying to negotiate wet pavement and see through drenching sheets of rain while telling my children anything, certainly not that today they might see their father for the last time. I had every intention of having as much support around me as humanly possible. Yet there I was, alone in a car with the kids! When the hard news comes, it all comes back to simply doing the best you can.

We don’t always think in terms of having to share bad news in unlikely places, but we cannot anticipate and plan only for perfect conditions, if there even is such a thing. Allowing yourself the time you need to take in those breaths and center yourself, your feelings and emotions will only benefit your children when the time comes to talk with them. Remember, a necessary part of being there for your children and help them through the turbulent moments is to take care of your needs. Be in contact with family, friends, and other support systems throughout the crisis to help take care of you. Then you will be more readily available to meet the needs of your children.

Word choice and how much to explain depends on the age and maturity of the child.

Keeping your words in check is a must. Play to the younger crowd. You can go deeper with the older children at another time. But that first bit of news may overwhelm them. The simpler you put things, the easier it is for them to grasp. Medical jargon is not going to be understood—even adults have difficulty with it! A simple and calming delivery of the message will keep everyone in a more peaceful place. The news that a parent or a loved one is close to death and leaving us forever is life-altering. If you are able to maintain a level of calm, your children will be, too.

Kids are going to hang on to your every word at this time. They are going to listen intensely to the tone of your voice and the words you choose, and they will apply meaning to it all. If you feel that you are not in a good place to deliver any news to your children, it may be best to either talk first to someone else, or have another adult help you. Children do pick up on our feelings, emotions, verbal language, and body language. We often don’t give them credit for their intuitive nature. They are going to sense if you are not truthful with them—and that will only work against you in the end. Being up front and honest is always the better way to go. Don’t be afraid to explain that you don’t know something. Sometimes we just don’t have the answers, and that is okay, too.

The Spiritual Perspective

If possible, having a minister or spiritual leader to help break the news and explain the concept of death to a child may help not only the child, but you, as well.

When the hard news comes, it comes back to simply doing the best you can. I knew that our minister was available by phone, and fully intended, if the children were comfortable, to call her and let her speak and pray with them. News of death or possible death brings us naturally to a place of discerning our own mortality. Contemplating the meaning of life and death comes to the forefront of our thoughts. It is our belief system and spirituality that guide us through this difficult time. Relying on a spiritual support system attends to the care our spiritual selves need.

Howard Clinebell outlines the ministerial role in his book, *Basic Types of Pastoral Care and Counseling*. “The minister’s role in facilitating normal grief is to cooperate with the psyches’ inner process of recovery. During this shock phase, effective caring includes using supportive care methods, including gratifying dependency needs. Severe losses activate the inner-child.”

Preparation for discussing imminent death truly begins well before you are faced with having to tell children about the pending death or death of a loved one.

Think about what you have told your children already. What do you and they believe? Remember, that no matter what your religious philosophy, children will look at the situation from their age level and the concepts they have come to understand about life, death, and God.

For adults, another helpful book I would recommend is one within Neale Donald Walsch’s series “Conversations with God,” entitled *Home with God*. It became a support to me because it confirmed what I had told the children. They seemed to rest in the knowing that there is no “death,” but rather our spirit lives on simply in another form, in another realm. Yes, of course they would miss the physical expression that was their father—that would not change. But they could relax in knowing that he, or his soul, would be very much alive!

For many, the Bible can be a source of comfort. Reading passages together in which your family has traditionally found comfort in can help support the message you want your children to receive about the meaning of death. Using the Bible and any other spiritual texts that you find meaningful can certainly be shared with your children, though they may require some explanation from you or a spiritual leader if the text is too complex. Christians may share such passages with their children as “I am the Resurrection and the Life. If anyone believes in me, even though he dies, he will live.” (John 11:25)

The Old Testament offers wonderful prayers and thoughts on death that can be shared: “I for my part know that my Redeemer lives, that He, at last, will rise on the earth. After I wake up, He will make me stand next to him, and in my flesh, I shall see God. The One I see shall be for me; the One I look upon shall not be a stranger.” (Job 19:25)