

# Health Care

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ROBERT H. CRANFIELD D.C.

## Coping with tragedy:

### How can you help a co-worker after the death of a child?

**N**o one is ever prepared for tragedy. Yet every year in our region, hundreds of children and grown sons and daughters die prematurely—from illness, accidents, crimes and other causes. Their deaths leave a traumatic absence in the lives of their families. Employers and co-workers can help greatly by being sensitive to the impact of the person's loss and helping the person to function as best they can. C.J. Martin of the Bereaved Families of Ontario—Halton/Peel offers the following advice on how to support someone who has suffered this kind of loss.

When the bereaved employee returns to the workplace, acknowledge the person's loss. Frequently employers and co-workers are reluctant to say anything for fear of upsetting the person or making the person sad. Remember that the person is already sad. Saying nothing only serves to heighten any feelings of isolation he/she may already be experiencing.

Encourage a bereaved parent to take time off work as necessary. It is unlikely that the standard "three-day bereavement leave" is going to fulfill the needs of a bereaved parent.

Assist them in accessing all of the services available through any extended health care coverage your company offers. Remember that newly bereaved persons have little energy to complete these tasks themselves.

Avoid saying that you understand what they feel—if you have not lost a child, your

statement will not sound sincere. Avoid comparing their loss to other losses you have known, such as the loss of a pet or a grandparent. There are too many differences between these kinds of losses and the loss of a child for the comparison to have much value for the person and your well-intentioned remarks may sound insensitive.

Be sensitive about sharing stories of your own children's activities and accomplishments. This will only emphasize to the person how much they have lost. In being unable to respond with similar stories, the person may also feel less a part of the office social environment.

Allow the person to talk about their child when they want to, and don't be afraid to refer to the child by name and to talk about things you remember about them. If others

show discomfort at hearing the child's name, it causes isolation and diminishes the

importance of that child. The bereaved parent is never going to forget their child, and it is reassuring to know that others remember them too. Keeping the child's memory alive also helps the person maintain their identity as a parent even if their child has died.

If possible, assist the person with their workload so they remain successful at their job with minimal risk of failure and frustration. Doing this will help build self-esteem.

Although they are hurting, bereaved parents can still be valuable members of the

workplace. Encourage (but don't demand) their involvement and contribution as before. This may be the only part of their lives that the bereaved person feels they still have some control over. It is vital that they feel they can still function—do whatever you can to assist the person to function well.

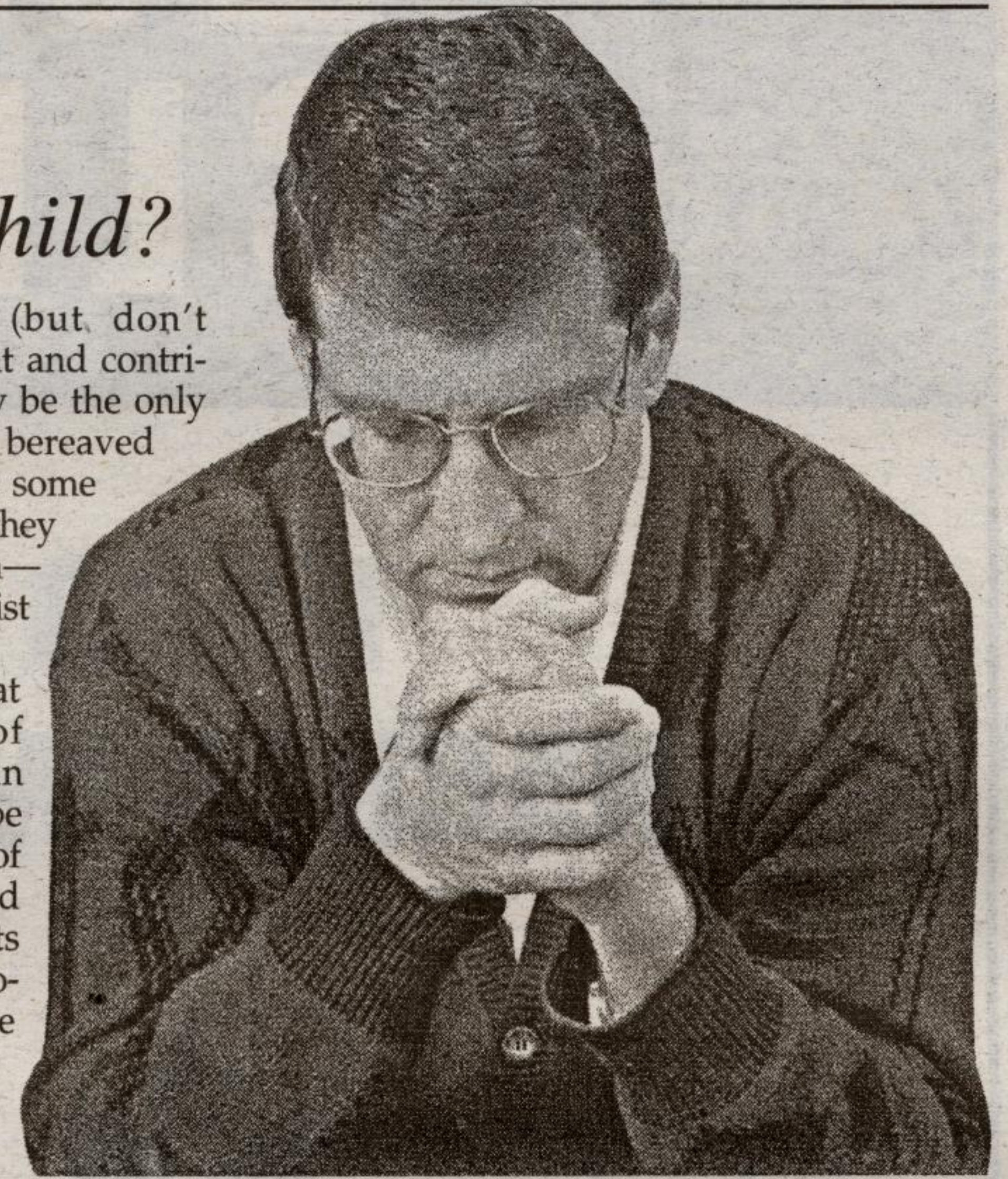
Let the person know that Bereaved Families of Ontario—Halton/Peel can help them in learning to cope and rebuild their lives. All of our support groups are led by fellow bereaved parents who have been through professional training and are professionally supervised. Over 99 per cent of the people who go through our programs say that our programs were pivotal in helping the healing begin.

The group programs help tremendously by letting the bereaved person meet others who have been through this devastating experience and who can truly understand the range of emotions and implications.


Nothing will ever take the pain away, but the group programs can help the person to learn strategies to survive some of the most difficult parts of the journey of grief. In so doing, they also help the person to avoid further grief-related risks, such as health problems, family breakdown and job loss.

Recognize a major personality change may indicate that professional help is needed. Help the person to locate appropriate resources and encourage their attendance.

If there are other surviving children in the family, let the person know that



Nothing will ever take the pain away, but group programs can help the person learn strategies to survive the most difficult parts of the journey of grief.



Bereaved Families of Ontario—Halton/Peel also runs groups for bereaved siblings. Help is available for children from age six and up.

It is invaluable for the bereaved person to know that they are part of a community that values them as a person, appreciates their pain and is willing to be there through the bad times. Employers and co-workers should strive to be sensitive, open, compassionate and accommodating and to convey a sense of respect and esteem. The workplace is an important part of the bereaved person's support system.

For more information or to register for a group, go to [www.bereavedfamilies.org](http://www.bereavedfamilies.org) or call 905-813-4337. The programs are available for free to anyone who needs them, because of the generosity of community supporters. To support the group, call 905-813-0363.

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