

To My Fellow Bereaved Parents...

Written by: Eileen Carlins, mother of Matthew, Rachel, Sarah and Emily

Time heals all wounds.

How many times have people said those very words to you, trying to ease your pain? Is it true? Does time alone heal us? I believe it takes much more than time. It takes work so arduous that it cannot be described. It takes putting one foot in front of the other when you have no belief that there is solid ground before you. You walk on faith alone.

Twenty-two years have passed since our daughter, Rachel Ann, died from SIDS. She was our second child, much loved and desired, and a lovely blessing in our lives. When she died, I thought that my life was over, and could not comprehend how my heart continued to beat, or my lungs continued to take in air.

Others tried to comfort me—we have all heard the clichés:

She's an angel in heaven.
It's better that she died young, before you got to love her.
At least she didn't suffer.
At least you are young, you can have other children.
At least you didn't hear her say "Mommy".
At least you have your son.
At least... it's better... its for the best.

Did any of these statements ever help a bereaved parent?

The only words I wished to hear were words that affirmed my secret belief that this was all just a terrible mistake, a bad dream, something bad that always happens to someone else.

In the midst of this pain, respite appeared in the form of other bereaved SIDS parents. Mothers and fathers, who had also suffered, but were now able to console others. They truly knew the depth of our pain, and did not minimize it, or try to explain it away. Yes, they told me that the pain would not last forever. I absolutely knew that they were wrong—that my love for Rachel directly equaled the pain I felt now, and if I stopped feeling that pain, she would be lost to me forever.

What did time do?

Time relentlessly passed as I grieved and worked and wept and searched for answers. Did time heal my wounds? No, but as time passed, and as I worked at grieving Rachel's death, and channeled my energies into positive activities, such as support for bereaved parents, I discovered that there were good moments that did not negate my love for my daughter. The fight against anger and bitterness exceeded my expectations in terms of difficulty, and it seemed so much easier to succumb to that bitterness than to search for an alternative. To those mothers who supported me, I thank you for your time, your patience and your love. Without you I would have been lost. How can I ever repay you?

Which answers the question that is often presented to me: "Why do you still do that?"

I equate the time I have spent on SIDS to the time I would have spent with Rachel. I attended all of my other children's sports activities, parent teacher conferences, piano recitals, rocked them to

sleep, read them bedtime stories and loved and kissed them tenderly. The time I did not have with Rachel is the time I offer to bereaved parents.

We have the gift of time. How do we choose to share it? A gentle voice comforted me at the darkest moment in my life.

There is a voice here for you.

The First Milestone

A milestone in your life has been reached. Your first year of bereavement is complete. You have faced many changes in your life. Perhaps your loss has caused changes in your pattern of living, your way of looking at yourself, or your hopes for the future. This is a good time to reflect on how far you have come, where you are now, and where you would like to go from here.

Perhaps you, or those around you, expected you to be “back to normal” and feel disappointed that you are not “over it”. Sometimes these expectations are expressed openly. Often they are unexpressed, but still implied in others’ attitudes toward us, or in our own attitude toward ourselves. It helps to remember that grief is a process with no particular timetable. And each person travels at his or her own pace. Think back to a year ago. You have traveled far!

Perhaps you thought you would be done with pain and tears. But, then something sneaks up behind you and you find an intensity of feeling you didn’t expect. It is, in a sense, a discovery of anew aspect of the loss that you hadn’t realized until now. And loss hurts! It is normal to hurt still, as it has just been a year.

Perhaps the difficult feelings of anger, guilt, or depression comes to the surface more easily now than they did a year ago. Or the question of “why” seems to be written in capital letters in your mind. Spend time with these feelings too, expressing them in whatever way you choose. They are also a part of the healing, much as our bodies use fever to fight infection.

Perhaps your circle of friends is changing. Old friends may not seem as supportive to us as they once were. They may want us to be our old selves again. But new friends are out there for you to develop relationships with. And a new friend learns about us as we are now—just as we are. And we can make friends with ourselves and come to value our own company.

Perhaps a look at life ahead fills us with fear or loneliness. The road ahead looks steep and dark. But, as we look around us, there are other people on that road too. Truly, we are not alone! Reach out to some of your fellow travelers. They may need a hand to hold.

A milestone is an important signpost along the road, for it marks our progress. But it does not indicate the end of the road; the road continues. There is more of life ahead for us. Shall we go on, my friend?

Putting the Pieces Together

Sheri Bradshaw is a SIDS mom from North Carolina and former Program Coordinator for the SIDS Alliance in the Carolinas. Her daughter, Catherine, died in December of 1994. Sheri and I met at the

National SIDS Conference in Dallas two years ago, and we have corresponded occasionally since then.

We have recently been discussing the struggle we all go through trying to understand the grief healing process. Sheri says, "It's like the pieces of life have become a new jig-saw puzzle. First you find the edges and make a complete enclosed border. The hard part is filling the inner parts. In grief work, the "inner" is the hardest."

Many people who have not been through grief have a hard time understanding what it is like. They often see the part of ourselves that we show others—the "border" Sheri talks about—and think we are doing fine. We are "over it" and moving on. They have no idea what is happening inside. Grief healing is not getting over our loss. It is learning to live *with* it, learning to live *around* it, and learning to live *in spite* of it.

Learning to live with it

At first, the pain of our grief may be so strong that we have a hard time functioning at all. Some days we may not be able to sleep. Other days we don't want to get out of bed. We may lose our appetites and not want to eat. We can't seem to concentrate on anything. Sometimes we can't remember what we started to say or how to do the simple things we always did before. The pain of our grief gets in the way. But we have to do all the ordinary things in life anyway. We have to go to work, do the laundry, balance the checkbook, and take care of the rest of the family. So, the first thing we learn is how to do all these things while we are in pain. We learn to live with it. We have built the border of our puzzle. That is part of healing.

Learning to live around it

After a while the day-to-day pain loses its edge. We have learned to live with it like the constant, dull, ache of an old injury. But, like an old injury, it can get aggravated from time to time and the pain comes back with a vengeance. Sometimes it seems to come out of nowhere and takes us by surprise. Sometimes we can anticipate it, like on holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, and such. Eventually, we learn how to deal with these "flashbacks." We adapt to them and adjust our plans to take them into account. In other words, we have learned to live around the wound our loss has created in our hearts. The middle of the puzzle is beginning to take shape. That is part of healing.

Learning to live in spite of it

Even though it may not seem possible if our grief is new, the day will come when we will feel joy again. We will laugh and have a good time again. Some of us feel guilty when this happens. We think feeling good means we have forgotten our baby