

Lean on Me

Gently

Helping the
Grieving Child

Second Edition



Doug Manning



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Grief is a family affair.
It doesn't just happen to parents.
Nor does it just happen to children.

The whole family needs permission to

Grieve IN THEIR OWN WAY,

And ON THEIR OWN SCHEDULE.



The Grieving Family

As a grieving parent you may be torn between the needs of your children and the all consuming presence of your own broken heart. You want to think only of the children, and sometimes that is possible. At other times your own hurts dominate your thoughts whether you want them to or not. You may be torn between being concerned and feeling guilty because you aren't concerned enough.

The early period of grief is a whirl of thoughts and feelings. We ask a question, and before anyone can answer, another question pops up. We seem to have several tracks running in our heads. One track says, "I am crushed and don't think I can ever get up." Another track may be demanding that God or somebody explain why this happened. Still another track might leave us wondering what we will do and who will take care of us. Parents have an additional track that leaves them wondering what they need to do to help their children. This track is full of questions with no answers. "What should I tell the children?" "Should I let them see me grieve?" During the early days of our grief, we are constantly changing tracks in our minds. We can't seem to concentrate long enough to think through any of the issues or questions. We just jump from one wild thought to the next.

We also change tracks in our concern for our children. Part of the time we can focus on them with great intensity. At other times we focus on our own pain. Too often, instead of accepting this as normal, we agonize about it and feel guilty. If you are living in this world of ambivalence, you are not being selfish, you are trying to survive. There is a big difference between selfishness and survival.

Parents seem to feel like their children are in their time of greatest need right now, and they seem to have so little to give them. It is easy to "should" yourself into a nervous collapse over this inability to give. The truth is your

ability to give is diminished right now; you have very few emotions left to share. Your energy has been sapped by the demands of grieving. Grief comes in waves, and when a wave hits, our bodies produce Cortisol which causes our minds to whirl like a gerbil in a cage and drains our energy. In time, your emotions will begin to settle and your energy will return. In time you will have much to give. Right now you may be saying, "Lean on me, but do it gently."

Add to all of this the fact that we do not know what is healthy for the children to experience and may feel that we should not let them see us grieve. We are left with the need to control our grief except for those times when the children are not present. This intensifies the grief experience and lengthens the process.

The good news is there is time for you to work through at least some of these experiences and fears. Your children will be more receptive to your care about the time you are able to give. Most of the time children grieve on a different schedule than adults. They seem to have a wonderful way of delaying reality; the reality of the loss seems to come in more gradual stages for children. In most cases, there will be time to at least catch your breath and walk through some of the roughest part of grief before the children need massive time and effort.

When an airplane prepares to take off, the flight attendant announces that if the oxygen mask falls down and you are flying with a small child, you are to put the mask on yourself and then the child. The same is true of grief. First take care of you. The children will be in denial for a while and you can be free to give yourself the care you need for right now.

This means you are neither a horrible parent nor a weak and selfish person. Your ability to care as much as you want to has been crushed under a load of personal grief. Your time has also been captured by the demands of getting things in order and preparing for the years ahead. I heard a mother in great anguish relate how terrible she felt because she had to finish her degree in order to provide for her children. She thought she should be able to do it all, and still be the perfect mom. She thought she was failing her children at the time of their deepest need. The day will come when you can care and give. Until that day comes, give what you can and trust that the day will come when you can give and they can receive.

Try not to panic. Grief is a transition. How you feel today is not how you are going to feel tomorrow. Your ability to care will return, and it will return much quicker if you do not intensify your feelings with a sense of urgency

About the Author



Doug's career has included minister, counselor, business executive, author and publisher. He and his wife, Barbara, were parents to four daughters and long-term caregivers to three parents.

After thirty years in the ministry, Doug began a new career in 1982 and devoted his time to writing, counseling and leading seminars in the areas of grief and elder care. His publishing company, InSight Books, Inc., specializes in books, video and audio productions specifically designed to help people face some of the toughest challenges of life.

Doug has a warm, conversational style in which he shares insights from his various experiences. Sitting down to read a book from Doug is like having a long conversation with a good friend.