

SECONDARY LOSSES: THE “RIPPLE EFFECTS” OF GRIEF

Secondary losses can be under-recognized grief experiences. This information provides some examples of the far-reaching nature of grief and acknowledges that secondary losses are both real and valid, and deserve to be mourned.

What are secondary losses?

The loss of your child is a devastating, tragic event. With this loss comes a series of other losses that create a ripple effect of other changes. This may include shifting relationships, changing family structure or even the loss of your child’s medical team, who may have become part of your life.

It’s important to note that secondary losses are not “less than,” but are other important types of loss associated with grieving your child.

How do I identify secondary losses?

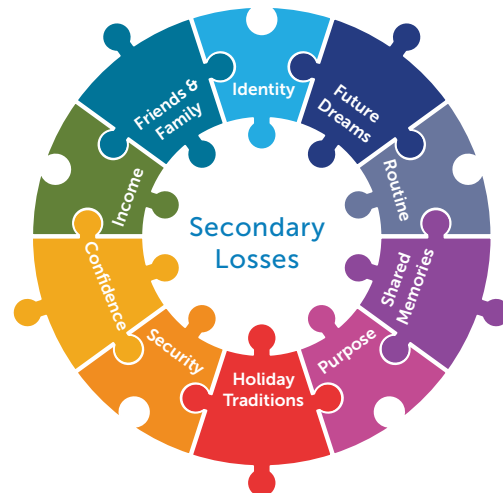
Similar to other parts of grief, secondary losses are highly individual and personal. Many families describe the loss of their child’s medical team, homecare team or the community of other families in the hospital.

Others share their loss of having a routine with their child, such as weekly clinic visits or medication regimens. These losses can sometimes be hidden from view, but are valid experiences that many families share.

What about shifting relationships?

Grief can change and disrupt relationships of all ways: to yourself, a spouse, other children, extended family, friends, employers and your community. Some parents notice a change in their support system over time, particularly after the first few months.

It may feel difficult to connect with family or friends in the same way. Remember it’s OK to tell your loved ones what you need in order to feel supported. Sometimes, you may even need a break from relationships that aren’t supportive to you at this time.



How do parents navigate changing roles?

Parents often have many roles in their child’s life: caregiver, nurse, advocate, supporter, cheerleader, to name a few. After your child dies, you may notice a change or shift in these roles.

Parents with and without surviving children may have a hard time navigating their identity or sense of purpose. You may also find that you may be grieving differently, or at different a pace, than your partner, other children or family members. Open lines of communication can help protect those relationships.

What about the loss of future?

Many parents feel the loss of future memories, milestones, weddings, graduations, holidays and time spent together. These losses may feel hard to quantify, as they have not yet happened. However, we often hear that future losses are a significant source of grief after losing a child.

These losses may feel heightened as you watch your other children or friends reach milestones that your child didn’t have the opportunity to meet. Some parents have also described grief experienced before the loss of their child, such as at time of diagnosis. This is called “anticipatory grief,” and is a commonly felt reaction for parents caring for children with a serious illness.