



**Any mother who is grieving the death of a child needs guidance for not only grieving, but also *living*. Drawing from her own experiences, Kim Erickson offers this profound and powerful resource that's invaluable for any mom in this situation—and for the friends and family who want to support her.**

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# devastating details

The days, weeks, and months following a death are filled with tasks that simply must be completed and questions that must be answered. In those first few days, when you are still in the fog of disbelief, the details are devastating. The questions are never-ending, and the only person who can answer them is you:

What should be done with his body?

When and where should we hold the funeral?

What clothes will he wear as he lies in that coffin?

What type of casket will you choose?

What food?

What songs?

What pictures?

Where do you want the flowers?

When should I come? Where should I stay?

What will you wear to the funeral?

And on and on and on these questions come. Like waves of the ocean, knocking you down and keeping your head underwater. Yet someone must decide and tell people what to do.

I remember looking around at all the people in my house and wondering what I was supposed to do. It ended up feeling like a family gathering. Food arrived, coolers were filled with drinks, card games began, music was played.

And then someone would ask: “Do you want to choose some photos to be displayed at the service?”

“No, I’d rather die,” my mind cried out, but silently. “Sure, let’s do it,” I responded.

What else can you do? There’s no other choice. At some point, I felt if I heard, “Kim, do you . . . ?” one more time I might explode. Violence might ensue. Someone was going to get hurt. I couldn’t take one more question from anyone.

The phone wouldn’t stop ringing. People wouldn’t stop talking. I needed some space. A whole lot of it. But that wasn’t going to happen. Those next steps of handling the autopsy, cremation, and memorial service for Austin would not go away. There was no other choice but to keep putting one foot in front of the other, answering one question at a time. All the while feeling like I was drowning.

After that first week, there were still details to tend to and things that needed attention. People were mostly gone from our house, and it did feel less overwhelming. The house was growing quiet. Too quiet. Where was my little three-year-old tornado? Where were the shouts and hoots of laughter? When would I hear his running feet upstairs?

The devastating details of “Life Without Austin” now became what I dreaded. No noises of trucks or “diggers” hard at work on some imaginary building project. No shouts of “Mom, I need help with Ethan!” followed by a thud (pushing his baby brother away from his building, of course). No giggles or snuggles or the thousands of other things that make your house come alive as children live and grow.

I wished for the people to fill the house again so that I didn’t have time to listen or think, only time to tend to all of them and answer questions. But I didn’t really want all those folks back—I

just wanted anything to occupy my mind. Anything but the reality of life without Austin. Anything at all.

Hello? Why is everything so quiet? What’s that noise, deep inside me . . . soul groaning, spirit longing, heart weeping? How do I make *that* stop?

I ate a lot during those times. I cleaned the house, ran errands, read books. I needed something to do. Otherwise, I felt the details of daily life would kill me by thousands of tiny cuts. I would just bleed drops of grief each day, over and over again.

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## Making Decisions When You Can Hardly Think

After a few months, more things began to crop up for us to handle relating to Austin's death. We needed to get his death certificate. His remains needed to be buried. We decided to shelve that decision—literally—for the time being. We needed to obtain all of his medical records because the medical examiner encouraged us to hire a lawyer to look into Austin's treatment (what?!). How do we deal with that? Austin's college fund had to be transferred to Ethan or turned into something else. Who cares?

The waves kept coming and coming. Just when we thought our feet *might* be settling back under us, another piece of mail would arrive or a telephone would ring, and remind us that Austin was, indeed, still gone. Decisions we never dreamed we would have to discuss came like nightmares, suddenly and without warning.

Oh, did you think that you were climbing out of that slimy, dank pit of grief? "Think again," taunted the mundane things of adult life.

How can a mother's heart survive something that won't go away? Why do I have to keep feeling that stab to my heart? Isn't it enough already that Austin isn't here anymore?

Please know that those letters, phone calls, decisions, details, and tasks relating to Austin's death did eventually grind to a halt. At some point, all things are handled and taken care of. Just don't be surprised if it seems to drag on forever. Don't be alarmed if you feel like the number of matters you must

tend to seem unfair and inappropriate, especially in those first few months.

If you are being buried alive by the devastating details of losing your child, please hold on a while longer. Just a bit longer, and you'll be able to breathe again. The tasks and technicalities of dealing with death will not completely overtake you. Those *will* subside. You can make it through this time period. Just take one day at a time.

To help with all of the details, we created a few different folders and boxes. A folder was made to sit right next to where we kept bills and important papers. Anything that needed action or a decision from us, we put the information in that folder. Telephone numbers, post-it note reminders, messages about the service, etc., went into that folder.

As gifts, plants, and cards arrived, someone was thoughtful enough to create a log for thank-you cards (sorry to say that never happened; I hope people understood). After some time, we created a box where things around the house that were distinctly Austin's could go to be put away for a while so our hearts could heal. Eventually, we made different boxes for his things: Austin—Keep, Hold for Ethan, and Give Away.

Don't ask me how we decided what went into each box! I have no recollection. I guess that's one of the marks of devastating details is that you are so overwhelmed by your grief that you don't remember much of it. When you look back, it feels like you were just on autopilot. Things just happened, but you don't remember exactly what steps you took or why you decided certain things.

In those early days, for survival's sake, I remember empowering others to take the lead in certain areas. I recall telling the women that they did not need to ask me about anything dealing with the house or meals. Unless it had to do with Austin or baby Ethan, they could do whatever they thought best. I didn't care what they decided to do with the leftover food or whether the sheets needed to be washed.

"Please," I said, "just handle it. Just do whatever you think is best. I promise we don't care. Whatever you decide will be fine."

You'll have to take them by the arm, look them straight in the eye, and give them permission. They won't dare make a move without your involvement or approval because the last thing your loved ones want to do is add to your pain or cause any difficulty.

Recently my brother Mark passed away from brain cancer. I decided to stay the week near his wife and four kids. I found myself asking his wife a thousand questions a day. I did not want to move Mark's water glass into the dishwasher if she wanted it to sit on the counter. Moving anything in the house that might remind her of Mark seemed too important for me to decide. Then one day, she cracked.

"Kim, I don't care! I cannot answer one more question. Everyone's asking me questions. I cannot deal with it," she sobbed.

I nodded and walked away, stunned that I had forgotten that time about ten years ago when Austin died and the questions nearly drowned me. How could *I* have forgotten?

Of all the people who should know how to behave around someone dealing with death, it should be me! Ugh. I felt like dirt. Stupid. Self-centered. Next, I felt grateful for her honesty. Without her telling me what she felt in that moment, I would never have had the flashback I needed.

That day made me look back on the memories I had of the people who had the guts to hang around my house after Austin died, and I saw them in a new light. I was even more grateful for them, more compassionate toward the questions. Questions were asked out of care for my feelings, not out of a lack of thinking before speaking.

If you are still in that season of constant questions, may I encourage you to consider that the people asking all those dreadful questions are doing their best to stand beside you right now. Be grateful for their courageous friendship. Go ahead and tell them you can't handle all the questions. Don't stuff it down inside like I did. Let it out like my sister-in-law.

It will take honest communication from you to help others feel empowered to step into your household or workplace. Consider putting one person, or a two-person team, in charge of certain things. One person to handle the flowers and cards. Two or three to handle the food and meals. Someone to organize and clean up. Divide and conquer! One of my dearest friends even took over putting together my outfit for the funeral service. She shopped, and I looked put together. I was so grateful!

I hope some of these ideas have helped you feel normal in the midst of all the craziness of this grief. It's normal to feel

completely overwhelmed. Normal to be exhausted by everything and everyone. You are not alone. You are not weak or different from others who experience loss. What you feel is not exaggerated or overly emotional.

What you are feeling is to be expected (but no one talks about it). What you are feeling is part of the process of working through the loss (but no one warns you). Please be encouraged to take charge of the devastating details in a way that works *for you*. Below are some ideas to help you get started.

## SURVIVAL STEP:

### Delegate

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So many people say, “Call me if you need anything.” Yet how many people have you called to ask for help? My guess is none. I didn’t either. We usually aren’t very good at asking for help. When grief feels like it’s swallowing you up, when you don’t even know what you might need help with, asking for help seems like it’s too much to figure out. It sounded like this in my head: “What *do* I need help with? Who would I ask? No one can help me anyway. No one can fix my problem. There’s no one who would want to be around me right now. Oh, never mind!”

After all these years have gone by, I’ve come to believe that people really do want to help you; they just don’t know *how or what* to do. So you are going to have to spell it out.

*Ideas:*

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- Make a list (or lists) of what needs to be done. Include everything you can think of, not just tasks dealing with your loss, but literally everything rattling around in your (feeble due to loss) brain right now.
- “Chunk” the list above by using colors or drawing lines connecting items into categories such as: groceries, cooking, cleaning, funeral service, cards, memories, photos, post office, hotel rooms for service, shuttles to airport, work emails, etc.
- Have someone help you with the list, “chunking,” and delegating.
- Choose friends or family members to take charge of each chunk, and then empower them to get these tasks completed, leaving you with only the items you alone must do.
- Tell someone you feel overwhelmed and that you need help.
- Ask someone to change your message on your phone to indicate you appreciate the call but may not return it for some time.
- Ask someone to set your email to indicate that you are away for a while and give another email or phone number if they need assistance right away.
- Turn off the notifications on your social media alerts (the less “noise” the better right now).

- Ask someone to pick up some folders or bins or boxes to help you get organized.
- Put a “we need” list on the fridge so that everyone can add to it (avoiding multiple trips to the store), and ask someone to make that trip to the store for you.

### SPIRITUAL STEP: Grab Some Time Alone



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I know you feel so alone right now. Having a child missing from this earth feels like half your very person has been torn from you and hidden in a dark place where you'll never find it. The emptiness is terrifying. That feeling, however, is not true. It feels true, but it's not. There is a God, and heaven is real. There is hope.

Find a quiet place where you can be alone. Cry out to God. Yell at Him if you need to push aside your anger at this unfathomable situation. Try going outside, where God's creation won't be denied. The sunshine, air, birds, flowers will all declare the glory of God. The wind and sun on my face felt like the microwave “defrost” cycle for my frozen heart. Somehow the birds sang healing into my soul. A wilting flower reminded me that this world is temporary. Everything is dying.

You might think seeing everything dying would hurt me after Austin's death, but it revived me instead. The fact that the whole earth is perishing, that all things die and new things are born, was a reminder that heaven awaits. Eternal life is

coming. *This* life, *this* earth is short and temporary. It also made me feel less alone. Grieving a child is a lonely road. It helped me to remember that all people, all things, experience death on this earth. I am not alone. Thousands upon thousands have lost children and have continued on with life on earth. Somehow, I would survive this pain.

You may find that people do not want you to be alone right now. They fear for your well-being. If you also fear being alone right now, that's okay. Just take one person with you who can be silent, who won't try to "help" you for those thirty minutes. Ask someone to walk silently with you.

If getting some time alone sounds too good to be true, you need to be assertive and make it happen. Tell someone you need to take a walk—alone. Tell them you'll only be gone thirty minutes and then you will be going into your bedroom for a nap. Even if you don't nap, thirty more minutes of quiet will do you wonders. You might find that people around you breathe a sigh of relief that you are taking care of yourself.

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You need to find a way to deal with the torture of living without your child.

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Remember, even Jesus broke away from people, away from the apostles, to be alone. He would leave His closest friends and grab some space and time to be alone. Usually, He would pray. In my human mind, I also think He might have just closed His eyes and breathed deeply for a few minutes, perhaps gazing around at His beautiful creation. Jesus knew that He would

be facing torture and death, so He made time to be alone with God.

I know what you're thinking right now: "I'll take it!"

I know that your own death, even if it involved serious torture, would be a relief from losing your child. I know you'd exchange places with your child. Since that is not our reality, you need to find a way to deal with the torture of living without your child. The point remains the same—when facing physical and emotional torment, Jesus took time to sit and pray in a garden, and you should, too!

*Ideas:*

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- Take a thirty-minute walk, followed by a thirty-minute quiet time. If you nap after your walk, even better.
- Find a quiet place to sit outside; ask someone to make sure no one interrupts you.
- Take a drive to a park, pond, or nature preserve; get out and walk for a bit.
- Put headphones on (so no one talks to you), but don't listen to anything; let the silence and your own breathing bring calm to your inner self.
- Go ahead—lock your bedroom door for an hour!
- Take a journal or empty notebook, and write or doodle whatever comes to mind.
- Ask someone to pick up an adult coloring book and colored pencils; spend an hour in silence while you color.

- If anyone joins you, try for silence because your soul is bombarded with information it can hardly process right now. Give your heart a break.
- Do a craft that you used to enjoy (I know you can't imagine enjoying anything, but just do it to allow your mind something normal).
- Read a book if that usually relaxes you.

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