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Mrs Shailaja Nair keeps constant reminders of her only child Praveen in her apartment. He died in 2011 in an accident in Batam.

ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE



About 300 people attended the candlelight vigil in memory of Nigel and Donovan Yap, the two young brothers who were killed when their bicycle was hit by a cement mixer truck in Tampines last month.

ST FILE PHOTO

Coping with the death of a child

Help is at hand for parents to deal with their grief, including bereavement services and a support group. Goh Shi Ting reports

Nigel, 13, and Donovan Yap, seven, who died in a road accident in Tampines, could not hide their devastation in the face of their sudden loss. Madam Sulliani Ang, 38, broke down several times during the three-day wake. Her husband, Mr Francis Yap, 39, appeared more composed but his red and puffy eyes betrayed a father's pain. "I would close my eyes, think of my sons and wake up," he told The Straits Times at the wake.

CRYING IS HELPFUL
For parents whose children die suddenly, there is a sense of shock and acute sense of terror, said Ms Majella Irudayam, principal medical social worker and chairman of the bereavement support committee at the KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH).

The committee develops resources and processes, and conducts training for staff in caring for those who have lost their loved ones.

The untimely death violates the natural order of things - children are not supposed to die before their parents, Ms Irudayam said.

"They feel cheated as they are left with several unfulfilled intentions and plans and have no time to bid farewell," she said.

It is a wound that does not heal. "What is most painful is that they relive the events surrounding the death over and over again. Usually by then, family and friends have gone back to their own lives and parents cope with the awful burden of grief alone," added the trained counsellor.

Ruthie Lawrence Loh, whose son, Daryl, died in

a navy accident in 2001 at the age of 20, has come to realise only he could help himself.

Friends, relatives and colleagues suggested he seek a counsellor or attend church, but "there was only so much they could do".

He described his pain as debilitating and striking without warning.

"When it happened, I felt an excruciatingly painful lump in my chest, and had to lie down to wait for the pain to ease," he said.

While his wife bottled up her grief, the gregarious 63-year-old former marketing senior vice-president openly expressed his feelings.

"I handled grief by talking about the incident and about Daryl. I cried profusely, as I believe that there is no shame in crying," he said.

Crying is helpful and necessary, said Ms Irudayam. Also, parents have to remember that the pain and suffering, while intense, is normal and expected.

"Parents may feel that they are losing their minds. However, they must remember that it is normal to feel so and that they are not losing their mind but are overwhelmed with the complexities of their emotions," she said.

Mixed with grief as well is guilt. "Parents remember punishments they gave their children, unresolved arguments that were not reconciled and there is always the question of whether they could have prevented the death," Ms Irudayam said.

SEEK HELP
To alleviate the pain, parents should get practical help from supportive friends and relatives, and not hesitate to get professional help if they are unable to cope, she advised.

Ms Chua Wan Zhi, a senior medical social worker at National University Hospital (NUH), said professional help might be needed if bereaved parents showed certain symptoms.

These include persistent low mood with poor appetite and sleep, lack of interest in their lives or immense difficulties in returning to normal routines after some time, she said.

At NUH, medical social workers work closely with the medical, nursing and other allied health teams to provide support for grieving patients and families.

NUH is currently setting up a pilot palliative care service that will provide care to dying children and support to the parents and families after the demise of the children.

At KKH, every facility involved in care of patients with acute illnesses, such as the children's emergency department and the intensive care units, assign bereavement teams comprising doctors, nurses and medical social workers to support parents immediately after their bereavement.

The teams also provide post-bereavement follow-up with the families over telephone calls or home visits.

At both NUH and KKH, if a parent is at risk of depression, he is referred to a psychiatrist by a nurse or medical social worker. Charges will apply. Other bereavement services are free of charge.

Mrs Nair has been going to see a counsellor for more than a year, after her colleagues suggested that she do so.

She and her husband, businessman SR Nair, 58, joined the child bereavement support group, which was started by bereaved parents to offer other parents support and friendship.

The two-hour meetings on the second Thursday of every month are attended by about eight to 12 parents whose children have died.

"We talk about our children and the incident, and how to cope with birthdays and occasions," said facilitator Valerie Lim, 49, who lost her one-year-old daughter to a virus 13 years ago.

"We celebrate life in a different way that affirms that our children have lived. We don't want a situation where we can't remember our children."

The housewife with two sons added: "It is a personal fear that I will forget, even though I have never forgotten."

The Nairs keep constant reminders of their son in their Sin Ming apartment.

More than 10 framed photographs of a smiling Praveen line the walls of the living room. His bedroom, which Mrs Nair goes into every day, has been left intact.

She said: "It's bittersweet actually because it looks as though he'll come back any minute, as this is the way he used to leave it. Sometimes, it's very helpful."

To distract herself from the grief, she went back to work a week after the funeral.

She also talks openly about Praveen and seeks out stories about him from his friends.

What some people do not understand, she said, is how life will never go back to the way it was.

"Things will never get back to 'normal'. It is a new normal that I'm blundering through," she said.

Tips for grieving parents

- 1 Crying is therapeutic.
- 2 It is important and helpful for parents who have lost their children to create memories of their children, for example, by keeping a journal, photographs, handprints and footprints.
KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH) provides resources such as a memory box and memory wallet to help parents to create memories of their children.
Using these, they can take home footprints and handprints of their newborn babies or foetuses.
- 3 Bereaved parents have to be gentle and patient with themselves.
The loss of a child can be overwhelming and painful.
Parents need to realise that it may take weeks and even months to come to terms with the pain of their loss.
Over time, the intensity and frequency of the emotions will lessen.
- 4 Bereaved parents need to know that the pain of the loss of a child will never disappear. With time, they will find ways to cope with the loss.
- 5 Talking to someone close about their feelings can help parents alleviate their pain.
Joining a support group, talking to other bereaved parents and reading books on parental bereavement also help.
- 6 It is important for grieving parents to get plenty of rest.
If sleeping difficulties persist for many months, they may then want to seek professional help.
- 7 Maintaining a good diet is essential.
While grieving parents may not feel like eating meals, eating several small meals may give them the strength to move on.
- 8 Exercising on a regular basis is also helpful.
- 9 Although grieving parents might have difficulty focusing, it is helpful to keep themselves busy.
Doing chores, such as cleaning the house and gardening, getting out of the house (preferably with some friends) or doing anything else that can at least partially take their thoughts off the loss for a while will be helpful.
- 10 If depression and anxiety or panic attacks continue for more than six months and bereaved parents are unable to maintain normal activity, then they may want to seek professional help.

Source: Ms Majella Irudayam, principal medical social worker and chairman of the bereavement support committee at the KK Women's and Children's Hospital.