

What Our Boys Taught Us

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The Christmas of 2004 was not to be the merry one that we had hoped for. My wife and I learnt five days before Christmas that our baby boy had passed away in-utero five months into the pregnancy. The next few days were to be the most trying days of 2004 as we struggled to come to terms with this reality.

Through the grace of God, Aidan was delivered without complication on 23 December 2004. As I laid Aidan to rest that morning, my tears were uncontrollable. I prayed that Aidan would be in a beautiful place – just like his brother Ethan.

WHY US?

Our firstborn, Ethan, had left us in June 2003 after a ten-day struggle with prematurity and congenital abnormality. Although Ethan's departure had left a huge void in our hearts, we cherished the ten days that we spent with him. That was why we were so looking forward to Aidan's arrival.

We now have to summon all our strength to face the pain of losing both our sons consecutively in two years. After the loss of Ethan, I had gone through a period of anger and asking: "Why us?" However, with the loss of Aidan, my sentiment was that of quiet acceptance rather than anger. As family and friends have put it, these events have occurred for a reason although we may not be able to fathom what that may be. One of the positive outcomes of these trying times is that it has made my wife and I grow as individuals, as well as a couple. Our relationship has never been stronger as we take turns to comfort and support each other.

These life-changing events have well and truly influenced my perspective of life, family and work, and will continue to shape the person that I am in years to come.

Over the last one and a half years since Ethan's departure, the grief we feel remains, even though our tears are very much less and the pain diminishes with time. Now that Aidan

has left us as well, the process will be similar. We love our sons despite the little time we spent together. Not being able to bring any of them home with us is so painful. I do not think our grieving will ever truly be over, and I will not want it to be over. Ethan and Aidan are forever in our hearts. So, we return to our lives and work as soon as possible. To us, doing so does not make the loss of our boys any less significant, and we do so knowing that we will continue to think of them in the years to come.



Forever in our hearts: Our beloved Ethan.

TIME TO GRIEVE

The significance of the event of loss should never be underestimated. Many have tried to console us after Ethan by saying: "Don't worry; you can try for another baby." We know this already. These words give us little comfort even though they are well meant, and in a way, discount or trivialise our feelings of loss at that moment. Recognising the importance of someone's loss rather than trivialising or discounting it is something we, in medicine, need to remember when managing patients who experience loss.

Facing and coming to terms with the event of loss is indeed a very difficult thing to do. We are never prepared enough for it. The Caesarean section for Ethan's in-utero

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distress and his demise occurred over a period of ten days under unexpected circumstances. The news of Aidan's demise was equally unexpected. After we found out what had happened during a routine scan for the latest pregnancy, my wife and I spent some quality time together that night coming to terms with the sad and shocking news. That time was very important for us to find new strength to face what was to come – the induction of labour and coping with the loss of another child. As I look back at that night, I realised the time that was used to come to terms with the loss is of utmost importance.

Most of the patients that we see daily may be facing an unexpected life-changing event that will result in some form of loss. As we advise our patients to undergo a procedure or surgery, we need to give them time to come to terms with the condition or situation as much as possible – be it a few minutes for an emergency procedure to a few days or weeks for an elective one. I believe this time is important. Sometimes, we push our patients to do a procedure according to our schedule, but I think we should ask ourselves if the patient is ready and has come to terms with the situation. This is a very important step in the acceptance of their loss and leads the way to a better recovery.

Perhaps, what would be better than coping with bad news and loss is to not be in that situation at all. By that, I mean it is far better to prevent disease than deal with it. Of course, there are numerous situations, including that of our boys, which are unpreventable. However, there are just as many conditions that can be prevented through lifestyle changes and screening. Continuing research should focus on discovering ways to prevent disease. This is the key to reducing suffering in our hospitals.

As I look at ways to improve my approach to patients and determine my career path, I have also come to realise how important it is to improve my own lifestyle. Having been busy at work, I have allowed myself to lead a less than healthy lifestyle. Things need to be changed. Doctors sometimes forget that they are to support and “practice what was preached”. Make healthy lifestyle choices: Eat healthy, exercise, allow some time for de-stressing and stop smoking.

CHERISH YOUR LOVED ONES

As my wife and I strive to improve ourselves, we look to the future with hope. The hope of finally being blessed with a healthy child to take home is definitely something to look forward to. I am reminded that as we counsel our patients on their prognosis, we need to help them see different aspects to hope as it is what one needs to face uncertainty. Hope is vital.

The other thing that has helped us cope with the loss of our boys is our relationship. My wife and I are very open and mutually supportive of each other. It is a relationship built up gradually over the years that we have been together. It is this strength in our relationship that has allowed us to weather our double tragedy. I am reminded that, while we concentrate on our careers, we should not neglect our families and should constantly strive to build better relationships. Ups and downs in life are inevitable but having someone to share these experiences with is priceless.

Family, friends and colleagues also played an important part in our recovery through their show of concern, prayers and support. We take this opportunity to express our thanks and gratitude.

As I write this article, news of the devastation caused by the killer tsunami shocked me and I am deeply saddened by the tens of thousands of deaths. The tragedy of affected families somehow makes the loss of Ethan and Aidan pale in comparison. Still, I can understand to a certain extent what they are going through and can only pray that the survivors remain strong. The fragility of life is illustrated so clearly as we end this year. What we have today is for us to cherish, and should we face loss, we should concentrate on what we have now and appreciate what we had no matter how brief. Our ten days with Ethan brought us immense joy that is indescribable, and the anticipation of Aidan's arrival had similarly brought numerous smiles to our faces.

Ethan and Aidan now lie together under sunflowers. Just like sunflowers, they were with us for only a short period of time, but while they were with us, they dazzled us. ■

