

Lifestyle.

TUESDAY, AUGUST 18, 1987

Facing life after losing a child

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"I still feel like I'm not part of this world," said Louise Dimitri the other day, recalling the death of her son almost two years ago. "Somehow, you feel different. The world sympathizes with you to a point, but you have to adjust; the world doesn't adjust to you. And people look at you in a terrible way, because *you* look so terrible."

Psychologists say that coping with the loss of a child is the most traumatic event a person can face. The death of a parent is expected; the loss of one's spouse, while devastating, is debilitating only in rare cases. But most parents take years to learn how to cope with the death of a child; some never do.

How does a parent deal with the blow? When 12-year-old Jennifer Schweiger's body was discovered last week on the grounds of the Staten Island Developmental Center, the question came into sharp focus. The Westerleigh girl's disappearance had mobilized countless Islanders in a search effort that was truly remarkable. Her death united them in a different way — an entire community grieved.

"A lot depends on the circumstances," said Dr. Kathleen Sullivan, a Grasmere psychologist. "If a child is ill, suffering from leukemia, say, the easiest way for parents to ease their grief is to have them put themselves in (the child's) shoes. You wouldn't want him to have to go on with that pain. But when a child is stricken suddenly, like in a bicycle acci-

dent, that is the most difficult kind of grief."

Sudden or tragic death, a death like Jennifer's, is hard to understand, to rationalize, because it means "trying to control factors that go beyond our control. You can set goals in life and move toward them . . . but then something happens over which you have no control," explained Ms. Sullivan. "They'll ask the question, 'What is the reason?' . . . And only in time will that reason come forth. It won't remain a mystery forever."

The "reason" for such a tragedy may be found in the strength that parents manage to find afterward. For some it culminates in helping other parents in similar circumstances. For a number of Islanders it has taken the form of participation in The Compassionate Friends Inc., a self-help, non-denominational group for parents who have lost a child to illness, accident, murder or suicide. It is where Mrs. Dimitri and her husband, Sal, a retired New York City policeman, found refuge.

"I was out of my mind with grief," recalled Mrs. Dimitri, a Castleton Corners homemaker, when her 32-year-old son was killed in an automobile accident. "I know there are self-help groups in this world for almost anything, so I asked the funeral director, and he told me about the group."

This year she and her husband are heading the five-year-old Staten Island chapter. The group meets the last Thursday of each month at 8 p.m. in room 201 of the student union building at Wagner College.

(For further information, call 698-4609. The group will make an effort to provide transportation.)

Discussion topics have included coping with pain and dealing with the presence of the child's possessions. Members often speak to each other between meetings.

The woman who helped found the Island chapter of the national organization is Peggy Gabrielline of Grymes Hill, who lost her 18-year-old son in a car accident seven years ago.

"At first, you're so devastated," said Mrs. Gabrielline. "You feel like you can't live with the pain any longer and you lose all sense of feeling. But when we get together, you gain strength."

Added Mrs. Dimitri, "In the beginning, she (Mrs. Gabrielline) told me, 'You will laugh again.' And I thought, 'how could I ever laugh again?' But you do, occasionally."

Mrs. Dimitri said she and her husband have drifted away from old friends. "We've really driven them away . . . because they knew our child." She says she feels more comfortable with people she's met in the last two years: "They don't know my other life."

But Rose Coronato of Oakwood, whose 23-year-old son was also killed in a car accident 1½ years ago, has found great solace in her friends. "I've been very lucky. My friends — and family — have been incredible. Most people (who have lost children) say their friends shy away from them, that they feel they're unlucky." Compassionate Friends, she said, is a place "where other parents understand what you're going through."