

FIRSTLIGHT NEWSLETTER



MESSAGE FROM FIRSTLIGHT CEO

Dear friends and supporters of FirstLight,

Thank you so much for your support for FirstLight in 2021 which was a remarkable year by any standard. Demand for FirstLight's services was the highest since the organisation was established some 45 years ago. 129 families across Ireland who experienced the sudden loss of their child, as well as some 33 families from previous years were supported by FirstLight's team of psychotherapists led by Georgia Howard, ably assisted by Andrew Mernagh. In addition to the 162 families already mentioned, 45 bereaved persons in crisis who made contact via FirstLight's 24/7 Helpline were supported. All families referred to FirstLight were attended to – there was no waiting list. Telephone support, Home Visits or their virtual equivalent, and couple and one counselling to adults and children, both face to face and by tele/online channels, were provided. The online private Facebook Group for Mums was active and vibrant and 14 virtual Mile in Memory Walks took place on Father's Day, 2021 in/from various locations across the country.

FirstLight's information resources were updated and distributed to all hospitals, public health centres and Tusla centres around the country. We were delighted to collaborate with other bereavement support organisations in the course of 2021 and thank them for their support for FirstLight's families. We are very grateful for the grant support received from State agencies in 2021 (Tusla, Pobal, PPNs and HSE) as fundraising was impacted by Covid-19 restrictions. To all to have so generously supported FirstLight in 2021, I extend our sincere gratitude. Your support has helped FirstLight meet the exceptional level of demand for its services.

It was heartwarming to visit Árus an Uachtaráin on 25 November where the third FirstLight Remembrance Quilt was unveiled in the presence of FirstLight's patron, Sabina Higgins. The quilt now hangs in FirstLight's Office in the Carmichael Centre and the 28 families who contributed patches in memory of their child who died have the opportunity to come and see the quilt. I want to thank Darina Howard for her skilful assistance in bringing the patches together and making them into a really beautiful quilt.

As many readers will know, when someone close to us dies at an older age, we often take comfort in celebrating their life and understand that death is part of the natural order of living. But, for parents who have lost a child, it is very hard to make sense of life to end at such a young age, especially when the death is sudden and without warning. The article inside this issue by Denise Witmer offers some ways to help you and your family cope.

Thankfully, most of the Covid-19 restrictions have been lifted and we can get out, meet family and friends and enjoy Spring, which is just around the corner!

With ward regards,
Fionnuala Sheehan, CEO, FirstLight

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**National
 24-Hour
 Helpline
 Number
 1800 391 391**

FirstLight
 Supporting Suddenly Bereaved Parents & Families

FirstLight Patron Sabina Higgins Views New Memory Patch Quilt at Áras an Uachtaráin



L-R: Darina Howard, Quilter, FirstLight Patron Sabina Higgins and Fionnuala Sheehan, CEO FirstLight at the Áras an Uachtaráin on November 25 2021

On Thursday, November 25th, FirstLight's patron Sabina Higgins very kindly hosted a photoshoot at the Áras an Uachtaráin to honour the formal unveiling of FirstLight's third Memory Patch Quilt. It was a lovely way to acknowledge the love that was poured into the quilt by each of the families who contributed to it.

FirstLight would like to sincerely thank Sabina for her hospitality and use of the Áras an Uachtaráin. This third quilt could not have been completed were it not for the 28 families who contributed their patch, specifically designed and made in memory of their child. A sincere thank you to Darina Howard, who so kindly took on the sole role of putting the entire quilt together. We would also like to sincerely thank the Drogheda Quilters Group, who provided all the families with instructions on how to plan their design and create their patch. Finally, thank you to Sarane Brennan of Quayside Quilting in Wicklow Town, who gave the quilt its finishing touches.

All three Memory Patch Quilts are safely kept in the FirstLight head office in Carmichael, Ireland Dublin. The two recent quilts hang on the walls of the FirstLight office and are available for viewing by appointment Monday to Friday 9:30 am to 5:00 pm.

If you would like to make an appointment to view any of the three FirstLight Memory Patch Quilts please phone Andrew Mernagh on 01-8732711 or email andrew@firstlight.ie

Advice For Coping With the Sudden Death of a Child



When someone close dies at an older age, people often take comfort not only in celebrating their life but also in knowing that death is part of the natural process of living. This experience is not the same when you are faced with the sudden death of your child. For parents who have lost a child, it makes no sense for life to end at such a young age—particularly when the death is sudden and without warning. The loss cuts so deep, it can be suffocating. If you are dealing with this type of loss in your family, here are some ways to help you and your family cope.

Stick Together

Stick together as a family and lean on each other for help. While everyone in the family will need to have their private time, you also can find comfort in each other. Being together can help you remember that you are not alone in your grief. Use the strength of your family's sense of belonging to help you manage your sorrow. Be there to consistently support one another. Although it was once believed that the death of a child led to a high divorce rate among bereaved parents, scientific research does not support this. In a commonly-cited study on the topic, the non-profit support group Compassionate Friends conducted an extensive study of parental response to their partner after the death of a child. They found that 72% of couples stayed together after their child passed away, 16% of respondents were widowed, and only 12% of couples got divorced. Some couples express they actually feel closer to their partner after experiencing the same life-changing event together.

Seek Professional Help

However, since everyone grieves differently, facing the loss of a child can certainly put a strain on a marriage and on each parent's relationship with surviving children. Seek professional help when coming to terms with your loss. Don't try to get through this situation on your own. Family counseling can give you and your family the skills you need to get through the tremendously difficult loss. If death is sudden, grief is not necessarily greater than it would have been with an anticipated death. But it may be harder to cope with because it is so disruptive, according to Therese Rando, a psychologist and the clinical director of The Institute for the Study and Treatment of Loss. For this reason, it is important to find a professional who can help you find workable coping solutions. These strategies will help you manage the days, weeks, and months ahead. Meanwhile, your other children may also benefit from grief counseling to learn to manage their feelings.

Accept Help

Be open and willing to accept help from extended family members, friends, or neighbours. Allow them to help you with meals, watching your other children, helping around the house, running errands, and most importantly, being there to listen when you need to talk. Also, allow others to do day-to-day tasks like your laundry or grocery shopping. Don't try to do everything on your own or without help. Give yourself the break you need. And, if people have said things like "let me know how I can help," take them up on their offer. Ask for their help when you need it. Those around you have the desire to help, but they may not know how.



Pay Attention to Your Health

More often than not, parents and their children are so overcome with grief over the sudden loss of a loved one, that they neglect their own health. They may forget to eat, stop exercising, and rely on fast food because they just don't have the energy to cook. They also might neglect regular doctor visits and checkups, too. While it is important to make an effort to eat healthy and get some exercise, do not beat yourself up for not going to the gym or cooking elaborate meals. Take baby steps to get back on track. For instance, set a goal of taking a short walk through the neighborhood each day and eating a piece of fruit with your meals. As you start feeling better, you can incorporate more healthy lifestyle changes and routines back into your life. Most people find that when they feel better physically, they also start to feel better mentally.

Avoid Negative People

There are plenty of people out there that just do not know how to respond with compassion and empathy to what you and your family are experiencing. They may say insensitive things; or, they may put unrealistic expectations on you. They may say things like "you should be over this by now" or "at least you have another child." None of these things are healthy for you or your family.

Grief is a process. There is never a point where you are suddenly "over it." You will get to a point where you can smile and laugh again. But, that doesn't mean that you are over the fact that you lost a child. Losing a child suddenly changes you; and if there are toxic friends in your life who cannot respect your feelings and treat you with kindness, you need to weed them out. You do not need more pain and sadness in your life. Surround yourself with people who are supportive and caring. Doing so will make the grieving process much more bearable.

Stay a Family

Be a family, and remember that your lost child is still a part of it. Everyone in your family will carry the lost child in their hearts for the rest of their lives. Create a family tradition that will help you remember the good memories you had together. For example, you could enter a community walk or a run in memory of your child, or start an event of your own. Other grieving parents have performed random acts of kindness in memory of their child, donated to a cause close to their child's heart, developed a scholarship fund in their child's name, or planted a tree or shrub in their memory. Be creative and do something that makes sense for your family.

Parents Online Bereavement Support Evening, February 9th

On Wednesday, February 9th Anam Cara, in partnership with FirstLight, Féileacáin, and HUGG Healing Untold Grief Groups, is holding an online Bereavement Support event. The event is open to all bereaved parents. It will open with a talk from Brid Carroll, Chairperson of the Irish Childhood Bereavement Network. Brid is a fully accredited psychotherapist with extensive experience supporting bereaved families after the death of their child.

The second part of the evening will have breakout rooms with FirstLight, Féileacáin and HUGG - Healing Untold Grief Groups. This will allow parents to learn more about the specialised support services each charity provides to families who are bereaved by suicide, stillbirth, neonatal loss, or the sudden traumatic death of a child under 18 years old.

For further details on the evening and to reserve a space for this event visit www.anamcara.ie or email info@firstlight.ie

Coping With Bereavement and Grief Post COVID-19



Be kind to yourself

Visit www.hse.ie/grief

In December the HSE launched a number of supports to help people who have been bereaved ([visit hse.ie/grief](http://www.hse.ie/grief) for more information). The global COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact across the globe on our experiences of death, dying, and bereavement. The way the virus spread, the restrictions imposed on travel (domestic and international), visits to healthcare settings; visits to residential and nursing homes, house visits, funeral arrangements – all impacted on death, bereavement, and grieving.

Working with the Irish Hospice Foundation and a range of partners, the HSE is promoting supports and services for people who may be struggling and dealing with issues responding to loss – and people trying to support those bereaved.

Grief is a natural process

Bereavement is the death or loss of someone close to us. It is characterised by grief, which is the process and the range of emotions we go through as we adjust to loss over time. The death of someone important to us can be emotionally devastating - whether that be a partner, family member, friend, or work colleague. It is natural to go through a range of physical and emotional processes as we gradually come to terms with the loss. In most cases, grief is not a diagnosable mental health problem. Nevertheless, it can impact on our everyday lives and it can take a long time to adapt to life after a loss.

People grieve differently

There is no right or wrong way to feel following a death or loss. Grief will be different for everyone, so try not to expect your grief to follow any set course. It's not always easy to recognise when bereavement, grief, or loss are the reason you're acting or feeling differently. Many different factors will affect your grief experience after someone dies.

There's no time limit

Grief does not come in stages – it can come and go. Some feelings might occasionally come while others might be more prolonged or persistent. Most people move through different feelings in their own way and at their own pace. There is no time limit to grieving and everyone's grief experience is different. Some people feel a strong range of emotions from early on in their bereavement, while for others, feelings may take a while to develop. More intense feelings might come and go unexpectedly, or at significant times like anniversaries, birthdays, and holidays.

So be kind to yourself

Take each day at a time. You might have good days and bad days, and that's ok. Be patient and gentle with yourself. Allow yourself time to experience and express your feelings – remember there is no right or wrong way to be feeling at any particular time, and different feelings might occasionally come and go. Always look after your physical and mental health, especially when days feel more difficult than others. Get good sleep and regular exercise, try to keep a healthy diet, and avoid alcohol.

DATES FOR DAIRY IN 2022



The Great Limerick Run, Sunday, 1 May 2022

- The Great Limerick Run is back on Sunday, 1 May 2022 over the May Bank Holiday weekend 2022 with a distance for everybody. It is the biggest mass participation sporting event outside Dublin. Choose from a marathon, a marathon relay, a half marathon, a 20 mile, or a 6-mile event. For further details:

www.greatlimerickrun.com

Cork City Marathon, Sunday, June 5th, 2022

- The Cork City Marathon is back on Sunday, 5 June 2022 with a Marathon, Half Marathon, and Relay event. The course takes you through the beautiful and unique streetscapes of Cork City and its suburbs. The full marathon distance can be competed as a team relay event for 2-5 people. For further details: www.corkcitymarathon.ie

Mile in Memory Walk 2022, Sunday, June 19th

- FirstLight's annual Mile in Memory Remembrance Walk will take place on Father's Day Sunday, June 19th nationwide. If you would like to host a walk in your area please [email andrew@firstlight.ie](mailto:andrew@firstlight.ie) or [phone 01-8732711](tel:01-8732711)

VHI Women's Mini Marathon, Sunday, June 15th, 2022

- The Vhi Women's Mini Marathon, an annual 10k charity road race, occurs each June bank holiday weekend in Dublin and is the largest Women's event of its kind in the world. In 2020, due to Covid 19, the Vhi Women's Mini Marathon went virtual for the first time. The event took place in October 2020 and attracted over 22,000 entrants from all over the world and again in 2021. The hope for 2022 would be to host the event in public once again COVID-19 restrictions permitting. For further details: www.vhiwomensminimarathon.ie

Baby Loss Awareness Week is held annually from 9 to 15 October

- An annual collaboration between more than 60 charities across the UK and Ireland, Baby Loss Awareness Week aims to raise awareness about the key issues affecting those who have experienced a sudden loss of a child. For further details: www.babyloss-awareness.org

Global Wave of Light Saturday, October 15th, 7:00 pm

- Please join FirstLight for the Global Wave of Light Saturday, October 15 at 7 pm. Baby Loss Awareness Week finishes each year on October 15 with the global Wave of Light'. October 15 is also International Pregnancy and Infant Loss Remembrance Day and is recognised across the world and we would like to invite you to join with other families across the world and take part in the global Wave of Light'. Simply light a candle at 7 pm local time and leave it burning for at least 1 hour to join us in remembering all babies that have died too soon. For further details: www.babyloss-awareness.org

Irish Life Dublin Marathon, Sunday, October 30th, 2022, 8:45 am

- By the time the next Dublin Marathon comes around on October 30th, it will have been three years since the race took place. The entry number is capped at 25,000 and everyone who signed up for the 2020 edition had the option to either keep their spot until the race returns to the streets or get a full refund. Very few took the refund. For further details visit: www.irishlifedublinmarathon.ie

National 24-Hour Helpline Number 1800 391 391

Carmichael Centre, 4 North Brunswick Street, Dublin 7

Phone: 01-8732711: Website: www.firstlight.ie: Charity No. CHY7716

If you have a newsletter query or a story for inclusion in the newsletter please email info@firstlight.ie