

Miscarriage, Stillbirth, and Infant Death

A baby's death is one of the most painful and traumatic experiences a parent will confront in a lifetime. Although nothing can take away the pain you feel right now, it may be helpful to know what others have experienced or found comforting as they struggled to deal with the intense grief that followed the death of their child.

It is important to give yourself permission to grieve. Grieving the death of a baby may last far longer than you and others expect. Frequently those around you may be uncomfortable with the intense emotions you experience. Be patient with yourself and do not expect too much too soon.

No matter what age, your child was and is a part of you, and when your baby died, so did many of your hopes and dreams for the future. Choosing a name as well as having a funeral or memorial service can help affirm that you are a parent and have the right to grieve as long and as intensely as necessary.

SYMPTOMS OF GRIEF

When a baby dies, normal symptoms of grief are varied. Parental reactions and intensity of feelings may differ. Typical reactions include the following:

- Crying, loneliness, a feeling of isolation.
- A need to talk about the death and the details of what happened.
- Feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, depression.
- Anger, guilt, blame.
- Loss of appetite, overeating, sleeplessness, irritability.
- Inability to concentrate, comprehend or remember.
- Loss of goals and aims in life, a sense of desolation about the future.
- Aching arms, phantom crying, frequent sighing.

Grief can last far longer than you or others may expect and has many ups and downs. The first year can be especially difficult when parents ask themselves painful questions or torment themselves with the following statements:

- Why did this happen to my baby, my child?
- Why did this happen to our family?
- Why didn't I know something was wrong?
- Why didn't I go to the doctor sooner?
- It's all my fault!
- If only . . .

There may be no adequate or satisfying answers to these questions or statements. Anger and guilt are common reactions and usually accompany grief. Try to share and express these feelings as a way of releasing them, eventually forgiving yourself and others. Also, many parents find it helpful to take time to acquire information that deals specifically with this loss and to become familiar with the problems associated with infant death.

THE IMPACT OF GRIEF ON MARRIAGE

The reaction to the death of a baby is as individual as the person experiencing it. Spouses or partners often grieve in different ways, frequently misunderstanding each other's reactions or needs. You may be reluctant to express feelings of sadness when your partner has had a "good day" or vice versa. Some partners may not want to talk about the death but still feel comfortable when the other needs to do so.

Crying is another area where partners may differ. It is an acceptable and healthy expression of grief but many fathers may find it difficult to allow themselves to release built-up tension through crying. Fathers often feel the need and are encouraged by others to be strong, but crying is a normal and healthy reaction.

Grieving is emotionally, physically, and mentally exhausting and does not leave much energy for anything else. Communication may be difficult but it is essential so that misunderstandings and intense emotions do not lead to problems in the marriage. Grief, however, is stressful and couples need to be aware that grief does not always bring partners closer together.

It is helpful when spouses recognize these differences and do not blame each other or feel the other does not care or is not hurting. It is more likely a difference in the ability to express intense feelings rather than a deliberate attempt to hurt. Continue to share your feelings and keep in mind that outward expressions of grief may indicate only a portion of what a person is feeling or experiencing.

Husbands and wives may react differently to intimacy as well. While one partner may need and seek this closeness and the assurance that not everything has changed, the other partner may take the suggestion of intimacy as an affront, not understanding how anyone could think of intimacy when a baby has died. Recognize that these reactions are normal. With time and patience, most couples reestablish intimacy when both feel ready.

It is important for couples to understand that there are no simple solutions to these problems, no timetable, or recipe for recovery. Every effort should be made to share what you are feeling. Your relationship may be uncomfortable for a while as you cope with these intense feelings and emotions.

COPING WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS

Friends, relatives, and co-workers may be uncomfortable around you. They may not understand the intensity of your grief or may feel helpless to console and comfort you. Consequently, many offer cliches or platitudes as a source of comfort. You may hear some of the following statements:

- You will have more children.
- You were lucky it was early in your pregnancy.
- You're still young enough to have more children.
- You're lucky you did not bring the baby home from the hospital.

These statements hurt but there is little you can say or do to answer these platitudes offered by people with sincere intentions of helping you. Since they have not had your experience, it will be difficult for them to understand the length and depth of your grief and sadness. Another way family and friends offer comfort is to suggest you have another baby. Let your family and friends know how important this baby was to you and ask them to be supportive by listening.

SUBSEQUENT PREGNANCY

The decision to have or not have another baby belongs to you and your partner. There is no "appropriate" waiting period after the mother's recovery. No matter what decision you make regarding a subsequent pregnancy or adoption, it will probably not change the length of your grief for your baby who died. When planning another pregnancy, be aware that aside from the physical stress, subsequent pregnancies can often be difficult emotionally.

SURVIVING SIBLINGS

Young siblings grieve too and can be passed over for support as being "too young to understand". Encourage your surviving children to talk about their baby brother or sister. Many bereavement organizations have support groups and reading material especially for bereaved children. It might be helpful for your child(ren) to share their feelings with other children who have experienced the death of a brother or sister.

QUESTIONS ABOUT RELIGIOUS FAITH

Your baby's death may cause you to challenge or question your faith or philosophy of life. For a time you may feel that life is unfair and meaningless, and that you have nothing to live for. Some of your anger may be directed at God and you may need time to reexamine your religious beliefs. These feelings may be frightening but it is important to allow yourself the freedom to raise these questions without feelings of guilt. A sense of purpose and control will return to your life, but this is a gradual process and there is no time limit. For many, however, faith provides support and often helps parents to accept the unacceptable.

SUBSTANCE ABUSE

It may be tempting to dull the pain of grief by using alcohol and/or (prescription) drugs, but this may only delay and therefore prolong the normal grief process. You cannot escape the pain of grief and disappointment until you have faced the intensity of these feelings head-on.

SOME THINGS YOU MAY FIND HELPFUL

Pictures and other mementos seem to help parents grieve. Parents, however, who experienced miscarriage or infant death, may have few of these. Many parents create memories by keeping a baby book or a special box containing hospital records, certificates, sympathy cards, pictures, and blankets. Spend time with and talk with other parents who have experienced a similar loss. Sharing with these parents, in an atmosphere of acceptance and understanding, can ease the loneliness and isolation of grief. Those who have "been there" can truly understand and accept your grief. These parents can help you to understand that the most painful aspects of grief will soften over time and that you are not alone in your grief.