

## Ways to Support a Parent Whose Baby Has Died

**F**or many families who are pregnant with or have recently delivered a very loved and wanted baby, hopes and dreams are torn apart with the news that the baby has died. For the rest of the world around them, not much seems changed. Unfortunately, something very sad and life altering has happened that needs to be acknowledged. A baby has died.

The following information has been gathered by bereaved parents, friends, and professionals; as a reference for family, friends, and coworkers offering ways to support a parent whose baby has died due to early pregnancy loss, stillbirth, or in the first few months of life. Here are some ways to better acknowledge the death of a baby and communicate with parents experiencing grief.

### *THE FIRST ENCOUNTER...*

**Say "I'm Sorry"** — If you can't find the right words, it is better to say, "I'm sorry," than nothing at all.

**Avoid Clichés** — "Everything happens for a reason." "Thank goodness you are young, you can still have more children." "There must have been something wrong with the baby." "I understand how you feel." (unless you have an experience to share) "It was meant to be" "You have an angel in heaven." "At least you didn't get to know the baby." "You are so strong, I could never handle this." "I guess it's good it happened now." "At least you have children at home." "God would never give you more than you could handle."

What may seem comforting to you may be very hurtful to others. Clichés tend to minimize the loss and the emotions a parent has toward their baby.

**Say "I Don't Know What to Say"** — If you are unaware of what to say, simply say, "I don't know what to say." Honesty can be more comforting than words with less meaning.

**Silence Can Be Okay** — Sometimes there is just nothing to say. Just be quiet, be with them, hold their hand, touch their shoulder, or give them a hug.

**Apologize for Hurtful Comments** — If you do say something insensitive, acknowledge it and apologize. These comments can cause hurt and future resentment.

**Responses to Death** — Do the same things for the death of a baby as you would if another family member died. Send flowers, sympathy cards, share special remembrances, phone calls, make/bring dinner. If you are a close family member or friend, it may be helpful if you ask to help maintain laundry, basic housecleaning or cooking, or watch other children at home (if applicable). Be sure to obtain permission from the bereaved family before disassembling the baby's room or removing baby items.

### *IN THE FIRST FEW WEEKS...*

**Ask & Listen** — Ask sincerely "How are you?" and be ready to listen. They may have a lot to say and may repeat their story many times. In order to be helpful to their grieving process, you must be willing to listen. Sometimes parents can verbalize what they need, so you know what you can do or say to comfort them. You can also add, "I've been thinking of you" or "I've been praying for you," if either is appropriate to the situation.

**Don't Forget Dad** — Fathers and mothers grieve differently. Dads may not talk about the baby as much. Men tend to go back to work sooner and seem to reclaim their lives faster, but that does not mean that they are not grieving. Let them open up to you if they need to talk.

**Be Specific In Your Offer to Help** — Saying, "Call me if you need anything," or "Let me know how I can help," are generic statements for grieving families. Not all people are willing to ask for help. Offer to bring dinner Tuesday at 6:00, or ask to take a newly bereaved mom to breakfast Thursday morning at 9:00, or ask dad if he wants to play

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nine holes of golf Friday at 8:00. If their response is "no," it is okay to offer again in a week or two.

**How to Acknowledge the Baby** — One misconception is that the shorter the baby's life, the easier the grief process. The opposite is true. Whether the baby died during the pregnancy or lived a short time, the family lost future hopes and dreams. It is important when talking with parents to use the baby's name if one was given. By doing this you are showing the parents you value the short life of their baby. You will honor the family and baby, showing he/she is not forgotten.

**Avoid Giving Advice** — Everyone is an individual and grieves differently. There are no rules that define how a bereaved parent should feel or how soon he or she will return to the norms of daily life. Giving parents permission to grieve their own way can be healing.

### *IN THE FOLLOWING MONTHS & YEARS...*

**Parents Need Time** — The parents of a baby who has died will need more time to grieve than society allows. The average intense grief period is 18 to 24 months. Parents will go through ups and downs during that time. The future holds many milestones that will be missed, such as first steps, the first day of kindergarten, toothless grins, or a sweet sixteen. These milestones may bring tears to the parents, yet may have disappeared to others. Acknowledge a parent's grief and remember with them.

**Open Communication** — Bereaved parents need a safe person and/or place to talk about their baby and the feelings they are experiencing. They need to be heard without being judged or receiving unwanted advice. Allow the parents to talk openly about the pregnancy, the birth, and any future plans or dreams they may be missing.

**Remember Special Dates** — Grieving parents may be saddened by special events or dates (birthdays, due date, delivery date, Mother's & Father's Day, holidays) because they are a reminder their baby is not here. Always acknowledge the baby's birthday, as well as other special dates and occasions. These days may be difficult without their baby, and parents need your support at these times.

**Check Up** — After a few weeks, people generally stop coming by. Continue to call and check in on the family. Make a call, leave a message, or write a note to let them know you care. Most bereaved parents appreciate acknowledgment of their grief and the life of their baby.

### *SHOWING YOU CARE IN THE WORKPLACE...*

During and after the loss of a baby, the workplace can be a confusing and difficult place to grieve. The key to maintaining good working relations is to have open communication.

#### **What you need to know:**

Parents of a baby who died need adequate time off (refer to bereavement policies) and need a plan of action for returning. Mothers, especially, need appropriate time to recover and heal. Some parents need to return part-time and some can return full-time.

Try to help parents maintain a normalcy at work. Ask them to lunch, or sincerely ask how they are doing.

Grief can make a normal day of work unbearable. Employees and employers can try to alleviate feelings of being overwhelmed by either delegating or sharing job responsibilities.

It may not be appropriate to share emotional issues publicly at work. Discuss what is appropriate, and understand that grief is a normal process that takes time to work through.

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Crying, having difficult days, feeling confused, or having trouble concentrating is normal for grieving parents. Providing a safe place for bereaved parents to express their feelings will aid in their healing process.