Stillbirth, Miscarriage, and Infant Death

A baby’s death, whenever or however it occurs, is a profound loss. Unfortunately, society in general and friends and relatives in particular often do not acknowledge that this wished-for child, regardless of gestational age, was a unique individual and an important part of your future. Others may find it difficult to imagine deep grief over a child you as parents may have seen or held only briefly, if at all. To the contrary, the fact that your baby was carried in the womb or held in your arms for such a short while, and thus known by so few people, may add to the pain of losing the child and make grief even more isolating.

Memories, so important for the bereaved, allow a still painful, yet more gradual, good-bye. When a child dies before or shortly after birth, there may be precious few memories and little physical evidence that he or she ever really existed. Many parents create memories by keeping a baby book or a special box containing hospital records, certificates, sympathy cards, pictures, and clothing or blankets. Your baby was and will always be a part of you. Choosing a name, as well as having a funeral or memorial service, can help affirm your baby’s life, however brief, and your love for your baby as parents.

***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 despair about the future
* Aching arms and 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 torment themselves with painful questions and statements such as the following:

* 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 responses or satisfying answers to these statements and questions. Be aware that anger and guilt are common reactions and usually accompany grief. Try to share and express these feeling as a way to release them.

***A Surge of Hormones***

Many mothers are constantly reminded of the death by a surge of hormones in their bodies after a miscarriage or stillbirth, and even after an infant dies that was being nursed. It is important to know that these hormones can trigger a roller coaster ride of emotions including depression and anxiety that can last weeks or months. These hormones and their effects can complicate the grieving process.

***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, yet still feel comfortable when the other needs to do so.

Though many parents feel they must be “strong” for others in the family by not crying, doing so stops a natural reaction. Tears are a tribute to the child who has died and a healthy release.

Grieving is emotionally, physically, and mentally exhausting and leaves little energy for anything else, including communication between spouses. While a shared grief brings many couples closer together, care must be taken to preserve relationships. Understand that the bonding between each parent and the baby may be at different levels, causing grief of different intensities. Share your feelings while keeping in mind that outward expressions of grief may indicate only a portion of what a person is feeling inside.

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 re-establish 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 coworkers 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 clichés 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 fortunate because you didn’t bring the baby home from the hospital.

Statements like these hurt, but there is little you can say to such well-intentioned people. 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 may 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 of whether to have another baby belongs to you and your partner. There is no “appropriate” waiting period.

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 has 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. Your children may find it helpful to share their feelings with others of their age that have experienced the death of a sibling. Reading material can be helpful.

***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 re-examine 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.