

When a Baby Dies

Many people do not recognize the grief that can follow a pregnancy loss from miscarriage, ectopic pregnancy, stillbirth or newborn death. They respond with an attitude of “Cheer up; you can try again!” This attitude rarely comforts the parent. Because the baby was never held, or perhaps never seen, some people assume the parent should not feel a loss. The parent-infant bonding process begins long before birth, so grief is a common and normal response to a loss. The grief following a pregnancy loss can be especially difficult when society seems to be saying that grief doesn’t exist. The following guidelines may help you deal with your grief:

Grief

The grief you feel for the loss of your baby is painful. The pain can be lessened a bit by understanding what is happening. Grief seems to follow a pattern of stages which may overlap, and you may find yourself at different phases at different times. Each parent will be unique in going through the stages of grief. Remember that the grieving process is a normal and necessary part of saying goodbye to your baby.

Shock and Numbness

This stage happens initially and may last 48 hours to two weeks. This is a normal and healthy defense. Your emotions may seem uncontrollable. You may have some difficulty concentrating or taking in information. Your appetite may disappear. You may be exhausted, yet unable to sleep. You may want to sleep all the time. You may experience feelings of guilt, fear, anxiety, depression, or think you are losing your mind. You’ll find expressing your true feelings will be healthy. Friends and family may accept grief for a short time. They may not realize how long it can take to resolve.

Searching and Yearning

This stage may last for several months. You may have the feeling that you’re looking for what you’ve lost. You may feel anger at doctors, nurses, the hospital or even God. These are normal responses to a loss. Anger is also a normal feeling during this stage of grief. Share your feelings with someone who understands.

Disorientation and Disorganization

This stage may be most severe in the 4th through 6th months after your loss. Feelings of depression may be strongest at this point. You may experience a lack of motivation, overeating or no appetite at all. You may have difficulty making decisions or lose interest in your appearance. You may not feel like leaving the house or going to family gatherings.

Reorganization

This stage does not occur quickly. Be patient with yourself and your partner. Your actions will no longer be mechanical, and you will experience a sense of release, renewed energy, and an ability to enjoy yourself and have a good time without feeling guilty. You will never forget your baby, but you will be able to go on with your life and look to the future.

Emotions you may feel

At first, you may feel only shock and disbelief. Life may seem “unreal.” Gradually this feeling will give way to active mourning. While mourning, you may experience depression, anger (directed at yourself, your mate, your doctor, God, or life in general), guilt, irritability, disinterest or disorganization in normal activities, and sadness. You may also experience insomnia, sleeping more than usual, loss of appetite or overeating. You may feel anger or sadness being near babies or pregnant women.

Be patient with yourself

Gradually your grieving will begin to lessen, but this process is not completely smooth. Just as you are starting to feel better, something (an anniversary of your loss or the birth of a friend’s baby) may trigger sadness. Although you will never forget your baby, your sadness will decrease and you will be able to go on.

Thoughts and feelings

After a pregnancy loss, some women feel “phantom kicks” or hear “phantom cries.” They may experience aching arms from longing to hold their baby; some women may be comforted by holding a doll, a teddy bear, or even a blanket. There is even a possibility of experiencing some phobias. These are all normal responses and should not cause alarm.

Communicate with your partner and be patient with each other

Often, parents experience marital difficulties following a pregnancy loss. This can be due to the stress of the situation itself or to different grieving styles of the couple. Because mothers and fathers bond differently with the baby, they may feel the loss differently. Men often think that they must “be strong” and not show their emotions. A woman may mistakenly think that this means her partner does not care. The more a couple can accept and discuss these differences, the less painful their grieving will be.

Pamper yourself

During this time of stress, you need extra attention or pampering. Allow yourself any luxury that you can...a new outfit, a movie, dinner out, time alone. Enjoying yourself does not mean you have forgotten your baby; it means that you are taking care of yourself.

Be tolerant of those who say hurtful things

Often friends or relatives make statements like “you are young; you can try again” or “you’re lucky you didn’t get to know the baby” or “be grateful that your baby is an angel in heaven.” These comments can hurt, although they are usually intended to comfort. Most people are uncomfortable with grief and often don’t know what to say or do to be supportive. As you respond to such statements, try to keep in mind the good intentions behind them. Let others know that you love and miss your baby and let them know how they can help you.

Talking with others who have suffered a pregnancy loss is very helpful.

It often helps to talk with others who have had a similar experience and to receive comfort and support from them. Just knowing that your experience is valid and that you are not alone can be very beneficial in working through your grief.