

When Your Baby Has Died

Helping Yourself in Grief

Children are not supposed to die before their parents. When a baby dies, the “natural order” seems undermined at its most basic level. “This isn’t supposed to be the way life works,” we cry.

While a bereaved parent would give anything to change the circumstances, we are reminded hourly that the loss is very real. In addition, grief is likely complicated by expectations—those of yourself, your mate, your family, and your friends.

What You Can Expect

Grief is more than an emotion—it is a collision of every emotion a human can possibly feel, shaking us “from top to bottom.” Even though we are sometimes uncomfortable with emotions, grief often includes anger, guilt, fear, loneliness, and sadness. Grief is not just emotional, though.

You may notice that you are more tired and without much appetite. You might find sleeping is difficult, too. While physical symptoms like these are common for people in grief, be sure to talk to your health professional if you find these symptoms problematic.

The death of a child also challenges us mentally. Like when experiencing any significant stress, you might find it difficult to concentrate or to remember where you have put things. Simple tasks sometimes require much more time and one may start and stop the same project many times. Make “to do” lists and write down your projects to help keep track.

A baby dying often evokes profound spiritual questions for parents and family members, too. “How could God have allowed this?” and “Why didn’t God do something to save my child’s life?” are typical questions from grieving parents. Asking these kinds of questions doesn’t mean your faith is weak.

When a baby dies, one doesn’t just “get over it.” In fact, a parent’s grief is a long-term process



*Even people who love you
may make foolish or unkind
remarks*

of adjustment. You must learn to deal with the questions about why this happened and cope with the many hopes and dreams that died with your baby. Writing in a journal and talking with a supportive friend can be very useful in working through grief.

Dealing With the Expectations of Others

Bereaved parents often report that some of their hardest work is dealing with the expectations of family members and friends. Though these people care for you and would never intentionally hurt you, their words sometimes sting. “You’re young and can have another baby” or “She would never have been normal anyway” are hurtful words

offered by people who wrongly think they're helpful.

Parents who have suffered a miscarriage or stillbirth are sometimes told things like, "At least it wasn't a real child" or "At least you didn't get to know him." The truth is, however, that the death of a baby at any stage of development is a major loss because this baby *is* your child.

Grief in Your Family

While parents carry a heavy load of grief after a baby's death, be certain that other members of your family hurt, too. Often forgotten in the process, grand-parents feel the intense pain of grief when a grandchild dies. But they must also helplessly watch you—their own child in great pain, creating what one called the "double whammy."

Other children in the family are also deeply impacted when a baby dies. Even very young children sense things at home are different. In fact, young children realize they are being left out of the process and this increases their anxiety that they have somehow caused their parents' sadness. You must be honest with surviving children; they will learn about healthy grieving from you.

Since there are often major changes in a grieving child's behavior and attitude, make sure you notify people who are significant in your child's life such as teachers, scout leaders, and coaches. They can provide extra support like sitting with your child during the funeral.

Where to Go From Here

As you face an uncertain future, life is filled with questions. Since men and women often grieve the loss of a child very differently, you'll need to be extra patient with your mate. Be supportive and ask questions but don't expect your spouse to grieve just like you do.

Often, the death of a baby raises questions about future pregnancies, as well. "When should we think about another baby?" and "What if this happens again?" are normal questions for parents to contemplate.

Don't forget that the care of a doctor, therapist, or member of the clergy can be very helpful now and in the months ahead. Your funeral director or hospital maternity unit can refer you to a support group and resources especially for parents living through the death of a baby.

Be patient with your spouse, children, family, and friends. But also be patient with yourself as you learn to grow through this very difficult grief.

This article was written by William G. Hoy. A nationally-known educator and counselor in the field of bereavement, Dr. Hoy oversaw the clinical counseling program at Pathways Volunteer Hospice prior to his recent appointment to the Medical Humanities faculty at Baylor University. Copyright ©2013, 2008 by GriefConnect, Inc. All rights reserved.

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