

Pregnancy and Newborn Loss

GRIEVING IS A PROCESS

As a parent, you'll never really "get over" the loss of your baby. But you will learn to live without his or her physical presence and, eventually, integrate your loss into your life's experience. That you've been changed by your baby's death is undeniable. Your "rules" and ways of interacting with the world will be different now. But the "changed you" also will be a lasting testament to your baby's existence.

What's important to know is that you can and will move through your grief to healing. Knowing and understanding that grieving is a process can help defuse feelings of powerlessness and provide some measure of consolation, hope and peace.

While grieving is a very individual experience, it also is a process that has a number of phases. The phases are not experienced by all the same way. They may overlap. You will move in and out of them and may go back to a phase or skip one entirely. There's no right or wrong way to grieve.

The phases of grief are described in a variety of ways. Basically, they include:

Avoidance and disbelief. When a loss is so overwhelming, you may find it necessary, at first, to take time out to break it down into manageable pieces. Avoidance allows time to regroup, as it were, until you're ready to accept the loss into your lives.

Pain. Healing comes through pain. You may experience this pain in the form of depression; physical illnesses, such as colds and flu; problems like forgetfulness and difficulty concentrating; anger at yourself, at your spouse, or God; or guilt. Feelings of guilt over things that occurred during the pregnancy can be a way of trying to find a reason for what's happened. It's important to remind yourself that these feelings are a natural part of the grieving process.

Acceptance and adaptation. As you come to accept your baby's death and acknowledge that it has irrevocably changed you, your pain will ease. You'll integrate the memory of your baby into a meaningful place in your lives and hearts and be ready to move on with your lives toward a different future and a new dream.

Grief is a painful process. You may be bombarded by conflicting emotions and feel overwhelmed at times. Allowing yourselves to experience the pain is part of the healing process. Ignoring your feelings increases distress.

MEN AND WOMEN GRIEVE DIFFERENTLY

There are a number of reasons for this. Variations in your personalities and the way you've been raised, as well as how bonded you were with the baby, are primary factors.

Generally, women are more expressive about their loss, more emotional about it, and more likely to look for support from others. Since society expects men to be strong and unemotional, they most often grieve in more solitary and cognitive ways. Men also tend to be more oriented to fact-gathering and problem-solving and may, therefore, not choose to participate in support networks which are oriented toward talking and feeling. While women may cry and dwell on their memories of the baby, men may express their grief by burying themselves in their work. Keep in mind, though, that because grieving is such an individual experience, the opposite may also be true.

These differences in style may be misinterpreted. If you're a woman and your partner doesn't appear to be as upset as you are, you may believe that he doesn't care about the loss of the baby, and you may feel abandoned by him. If you're a man, on the other hand, you may feel that your wife will never get over her mourning. It's important to remember that how a person acts is not always a true indicator of his or her inner feelings.

There are differences, also, because parents experience different levels of bonding with a baby. The bond between a pregnant woman and the baby growing inside her is unique. Generally, it grows more intense as the pregnancy progresses. For the father, the baby may seem less "real." Although he may begin bonding during pregnancy as he experiences physical signs of the baby, like seeing an ultrasound picture or feeling the baby kicking, a father's real bonding may not develop until after the baby is born. For this reason, men may seem less affected when the loss of the baby occurs early in pregnancy.

These differences may cause conflict in a relationship as you struggle together and separately to come to terms with the loss of your baby. But there are things you can do to help your relationship survive:

- Be caring about each other and your feelings and needs.
- Keep an open line of communication and share your thoughts and emotions.
- Accept your differences and acknowledge each other's pain.
- Assure one another of your commitment to your relationship.
- Talk about your baby and find ways to remember him or her.

GOING THROUGH GRIEVING

Parents who have lost a child will carry their grief with them for the rest of their lives. This is called "shadow grief." But healing and the desire and ability to get on with your lives come over time. Since this is a very personal and individual experience, there's no "standard" length of time for it. Healing takes as long as it takes for you.

In the meantime, there are things you can do to help yourselves through it. Your spiritual and religious beliefs or philosophies may help you deal with your grief. Your beliefs about an afterlife also may be a source of consolation.

On the other hand, those same beliefs may make you more confused or angry. Feeling angry, especially at God, is not unusual, though it can be unsettling. Accepting your anger and allowing yourselves to have those feelings is the best way to face them. It's all right to let God know how angry and upset you are; this "venting" is necessary in order for you to come to terms with your spirituality.

Following are some suggestions that others have found helpful in dealing with their loss and grief.*

Take care of the physical you

- Try to maintain a balanced diet and avoid junk food. Try to drink eight glasses of healthy liquids, like juice or water, every day. Try to stay away from caffeine and alcohol; they can cause dehydration and headaches. Alcohol also slows body function and natural emotional expression.
- If possible, avoid tobacco because it drains your body of vitamins, increases acid in your stomach, and can cause palpitations.
- Do something active every day, like biking, jogging, aerobics or stretching. A walk around the block can be a useful first step in helping you get back into living fully.
- Don't increase your workload. Go to bed at your usual time, even if you're unable to sleep.
- Remember that your body will need time to get back to "normal" after pregnancy. If you were far along in your pregnancy or went to term, you may have bleeding for a time afterward and your breasts may have milk. Be sure to contact your health care provider if you have questions about your recovery. Get a physical exam about four months after your loss because your immune system is affected and your body is less resistant to disease during grief.

Take care of the emotional and spiritual you

- Talking about your baby and your feelings with your partner, family and friends can help you get out bottled-up emotions.

- When you feel you're ready, resume old relationships and seek new ones both separately and as a couple.
- Reading books, articles, and poetry can provide understanding and comfort, and help you feel less alone.
- Writing can be a good outlet for your emotions. You might record your thoughts and memories in a journal, or write letters or poems to your baby.
- Don't put your baby's things away until you're ready. There are no rules in grieving.
- Ask your clergy for support or help in renewing your faith, in finding ways your faith can help you come to terms with your baby's death, and in memorializing your baby.
- It's best not to make big decisions or changes during this time. Waiting 18 to 24 months or so before making a major change is advisable.
- Avoid letting others make your decisions for you. You and your partner are the only ones who know what you really want and need.
- Admitting when you need help can be a big relief. Don't be afraid to ask for it. Let family and friends know specific things they can do for you, like helping with child care or just spending time with you. Let them share your grief. Attending a support group of other couples who have lost a child also can help and give you an opportunity to share your feelings with others who understand what you're going through.
- Seek counseling, if you feel you need it, through your hospital's bereavement counselor or chaplain, or a therapist who specializes in grief and loss.

**Adapted from Rana K. Limbo and Sara Rich Wheeler, When a Baby Dies: A Handbook for Healing and Helping (RTS Bereavement Services, Lutheran Hospital, LaCrosse, Wisc., 1995), pp. 13–15.*

DEALING WITH OTHERS

The loss of your baby will have an impact on your relatives and friends although they will handle it in different ways. Many people simply don't know what to say, how to act, what to do to express their sympathy. They may be afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing; they may feel helpless because they don't know how to comfort you or give you support.

Because of this, friends may say things that seem unsympathetic, or they may pull away so that it seems they're not there for you. They may be feeling vulnerable. All of which could leave your feeling alone and angry.

One way of dealing with this is simply to tell relatives and friends what you need from them, whether it's someone to listen to you or a home-cooked meal. While this may require extra energy on your part, the return will probably be worth it. People who care about you will generally be grateful to know what they can do . . . and you'll benefit by getting the kind of support and help you need.

While you'll want to talk with your family and friends about this in a way that is comfortable for you, here are some suggestions you might find useful:*

- Let them know that their calls and visits, their listening to you and letting you cry on their shoulder are all very important to you.
- Reassure them that you don't mind them asking questions. In fact, you need to talk about what happened and to cry about it. Thank them for asking.
- Confide that it would be most helpful to you if they offered to do specific things, like taking your kids for an afternoon or doing your grocery shopping, rather than suggesting that you contact them when you need help. You can explain that you don't have the energy to assign tasks and that you don't want to impose on them.
- Explain that you'd rather they share their feelings with you honestly, even if they do it awkwardly, than try to cheer you up or give advice or say the "perfect thing." Let them know that you understand they may not know what to say and that it's okay. Words from the heart, like "I can't imagine how awful this must be for you" or "I want to help you but I don't know how," are comforting in their honesty and empathy. Even their tears can be a comfort.
- Ask them to use your baby's name and remember him or her on anniversaries. Let them know that, even if you get pregnant again and have other children, you won't forget the baby who died.
- Thank them for their patience and support as you go through your grieving.

As time goes by, you may find that support from your family and friends dwindles. That doesn't mean they've forgotten about your baby or that they don't care. In all likelihood, they will continue to provide support if they know it's needed.

Keep in mind that, since grieving is a very individual thing, you need to do it according to your own timetable, not according to others' expectations of when you should "pull out of it." As you

gradually have more and more good days, you'll resume your activities and contacts and allow yourself to laugh and have a good time. While the pain from losing a baby never goes away entirely, it does diminish enough so that you can go on with life and look forward to the future. Only you know how long you need to take to heal and to integrate the loss of your baby into your life. However, if you feel that you've become stuck in one phase of grieving or are unable to return to your normal activities, you should seek counseling.

**Adapted from Deborah L. Davis, Ph.D., Empty Cradle, Broken Heart: Surviving the Death of Your Baby (Fulcrum Publishing, Golden, Colo., 1996), pp. 160–163.*

REMEMBERING YOUR BABY

Depending upon your baby's gestational age or stage of development, you may or may not have had the opportunity to see, touch or hold him or her. You may or may not have named her or him. But gathering as many memories and mementos as possible—like footprints, an ID bracelet, photos, ultrasound pictures, stuffed animals—will help you to cope, to affirm your baby, to remember this time and feel close to your baby as you grieve.

Many parents seek to honor their baby's importance in their lives through a ceremony such as a memorial service, funeral, baptism or saying kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead.

This provides an opportunity for you to say a special good-bye and also allows other family members and friends to share your sorrow. The important thing is that the ceremony or service meets your special needs.

Such a ceremony can be as simple or complex as you want it to be. If you lost your baby through early miscarriage, you may want to have a ceremony at a location that is special to you (church, garden, home, etc.). It can be conducted by your clergy or even by yourselves. Some parents choose to do something symbolic, such as planting a tree.

If you have your baby's remains, your service will include burial or cremation. Many parents choose cremation because they can take their baby's ashes home or distribute them at a location that has some meaning to them.

With a later loss (after 20 weeks), funeral arrangements may be necessary. Even so, funerals can be simple, like a small graveside service. They can also be more elaborate, including viewing, interment, and a social function afterward. Your hospital social worker or clergyperson can help you decide what to do and work out details.

If you weren't encouraged or given the option to take your baby's remains, you might wonder what the hospital or clinic did with them. If you want to pursue this, you can call your health care provider. Usually, babies' remains are handled sensitively and are cremated. If your baby died early in pregnancy, cremation leaves no remains because of the tiny mass and lack of hard bones.

It's never too late to memorialize your baby. You can have a ceremony long after your loss. Or you can hold an annual service on a meaningful date. You also can publicly acknowledge your baby's existence by making a donation to a charity; submitting an article or poem about your baby to a magazine or newspaper; or giving something, during the holidays, to a needy child who is the age your child would have been.

You might memorialize your baby privately by displaying his or her portrait in your home, buying a piece of jewelry that symbolizes your baby, keeping a special houseplant as a living memorial of your baby, or making your own memorial such as a quilt, painting, pottery, or piece of furniture.

As you move on with your life into a new future, you won't forget your baby. You'll carry him or her always in your hearts. Your baby will live through you. And a full and well-lived and enjoyed life is the best gift you can give to that sweet child.

When You're Ready to Try Again

After a baby dies, some parents want to try as soon as possible to get pregnant again. Others are unsure whether they ever want to try again. And most go back and forth between the two. This difficult and personal decision can only be made by you and your partner. Here is some information to guide you in making your decision.

Should We Try Again?

You have just been through a very painful experience. Allow yourself some time to make the decision that is right for you. Keep in mind:

- All pregnancies are different.
- You might have to deal with the recurrence of a genetic defect and should get as much information as possible from a medical professional before making your decision.
- There are advantages both to waiting and to getting pregnant soon after the loss of your baby. Waiting will allow you more time to heal physically and emotionally and may help you feel less anxious during the pregnancy. Getting pregnant soon after the loss may make you feel you're moving toward more hopeful times and help you overcome feelings of "failure."
- If you've battled infertility or gone through a number of losses, you need to honestly answer this question: "Can I do this one more time?"

When Should We Try Again?

It may be a good idea to wait a few months to allow yourself time to heal emotionally and physically. But how long to wait differs with the individual. Even doctors can't agree because there are many factors—both physical and emotional—involved in deciding how long to wait. Other considerations include a woman's age, whether you as a couple are experiencing other big changes in your lives, etc. Get information from your health care provider, books and other sources and decide for yourself. It is normal to find that, while you may feel ready to try again, your partner may not. Then it may be the other way around.

Emotional Factors

It is important to recognize that you may be balancing feelings of anxiety, anger, obsession and ambivalence about a subsequent pregnancy with hopeful feelings about the future and grief and guilt about the baby who died. Even if you desperately want to try again, most parents find that their grief intensifies in the months following their baby's death and that another pregnancy feels too risky to even consider at this time.

Physical Factors

Your physical readiness to try again depends on the type of loss you had and the nature of the delivery (Did a miscarriage become expelled on its own or did you have a D&C? Did you go through labor and delivery? Was emergency surgery necessary?).

Your doctor will help you determine when it is physically safe to begin trying again. Once you and your partner have agreed to try to get pregnant again, be sure to:

Taken from: March of Dimes- "Pregnancy and Newborn Loss"

Web: <http://www.marchofdimes.com/pnhec/572.asp>

- Find a supportive doctor or midwife who is willing to give you the kind of care you want. You may need to see a fertility or maternal-fetal specialist.
- Talk to your health care provider about the timing of trying to get pregnant again and the number of physical issues that affect when you can try. For example, your milk may have come, and it may take a while for you to stop bleeding. Your provider may suggest waiting a certain number of menstrual cycles, as well.
- Go for genetic counseling, if it is appropriate.
- Follow a healthy lifestyle by avoiding alcohol, smoking and illegal drugs; take a multivitamin containing folic acid every day; eat a healthy diet, including foods rich in folic acid like fortified cereals, green leafy vegetables, dried beans, and orange juice.

Trying to Become Pregnant

Trying to become pregnant again can become an emotional roller coaster. On the one hand, you may feel hopeful and good about doing something positive. On the other hand, you may feel obsessed with getting pregnant and anxious about the outcome. You may even feel angry that you have to go through this again. Even under the best conditions, you may be fearful of the outcome of another pregnancy. Openly communicate your feelings and fears with your partner and get emotional support if you need it.

When You Do Get Pregnant

Most women become pregnant within the year following the loss of their baby. Remember, it is still normal for you to grieve for the baby who died even during a subsequent pregnancy. When you do become pregnant:

- Be positive and remind yourself that every pregnancy is different and that every baby is unique and special.
- Get prenatal care as soon as you know you are pregnant.
- Take healthy steps. Continue going for prenatal care and taking folic acid. Eat healthy food, drink lots of water and get plenty of rest. Decrease stress and avoid smoking, illegal drugs and alcohol.
- Take charge of your medical care. Get information about pregnancy, prenatal care and other topics that will help reduce your anxiety.
- Consider your feelings about whether or not you want prenatal diagnostic testing. A test is useful when it identifies situations that can be monitored to prevent problems.
- Recognize that this pregnancy may be difficult mentally and emotionally, as well as physically taxing, and that the hardest point to get past will be the point of your previous loss.
- Get the reassurance you need from your health care providers and be open about your concerns and fears.