

For many families, the instant you knew you were pregnant, your life changed forever. Throughout your pregnancy you may have felt excited. Maybe you already picked names or the perfect outfit for the baby, or even prepared the nursery. You may have also felt reluctant or worried about how this baby was going to affect the rest of your life. Whether you were feeling joy or apprehension, this new baby was an important part of your future.

The feelings you experience after a late pregnancy loss, stillbirth, are often overwhelming and intense. The death of a baby at any stage is a very real loss. You will not only have to recover physically, but emotionally and spiritually.

The following information has been gathered by bereaved parents, friends, and professionals. This pamphlet has been provided as a source for answers to some of your questions, and also to help you realize the normalcy of all the emotions and fears you may experience during your grief journey.

What is a stillbirth?

A stillbirth is the delivery of a baby who has died, and is greater than 20 weeks gestation. In about half of all stillbirths, a cause for the baby's death can be discovered after evaluating the baby. It is possible for the baby to have birth defects, or problems with the placenta or umbilical cord. Another cause can be found in maternal circumstances such as an illness or recreational drug use. Unfortunately, for many stillbirths, the cause for the baby's death can remain undetermined. Stillbirth cannot be predicted, nor can we predict whom it will affect.

How can I expect to feel?

Many times the discovery that your baby has died is a complete shock, and the emotions you have are overwhelming. You may be asking, "Why did this have to happen?" This news and process can be devastating to families. You now have to go from the highs of awaiting a

beautiful, healthy baby, to the lows of deep grief. You have not only lost a baby, but also the hopes and dreams you had planned for your future together. Your emotions and feelings will be constantly changing. You might experience a range of emotions at different times, or re-experience an emotion you have already felt. There is no *right* or *wrong* way to move through your feelings. Everyone's experience and way of grieving is different.

The following array of emotions makes up a normal process of grief. It is very unlikely that you will experience these in an order or as stages. The intense feelings of your grief will not last forever; there *will* come a time when the heartache will be less painful. Incorporating your loss into your daily life takes patience and time. Not all of this time is spent in acute or deep grief. The degree that the varying emotions are felt lessen with time, and healing takes place. It is important for you to know that what you are feeling is normal for *you*. You may feel...

- **Overwhelming Shock**
- **Confusion**
- **Low Self Esteem**
- **Loss of Control**
- **Disappointment**
- **Jealousy**
- **Anger**
- **Guilt and/or Self Blame**
- **Frustration**
- **Sadness and/or Depression**
- **Physical Symptoms Related to Hormonal Changes**

How are fathers or partners feeling?

This is likely a difficult time for you too. You may be experiencing many of the same emotions as your wife or partner. Sometimes your feelings may be equally as strong. Even though you may have similar feelings, you may feel very detached from your partner right now, and you may have difficulty understanding how she is feeling. You may feel a sense of

helplessness, as you cannot control what has happened or how you feel emotionally. Or, perhaps you have put your feelings aside so you can be there to support her. It is important to remember that you, too, need support at this time. Even if you have suppressed your grief, it is still there and will resurface again at some point

Another difficult issue you may face is other people downplaying the grief you are experiencing. Partners are not usually given much time off for a pregnancy loss and may feel torn about returning to work. You may not receive the support you need. It is normal to feel frustrated if you are constantly being asked how your partner is doing while it seems no one cares or asks about you.

It is important to know that the feelings and reactions you have are normal. It may be confusing or frustrating to experience this wide range of emotions. You and your partner will likely grieve in different ways and at different times. You can be supportive to one another, but know it is all right to take the time to grieve without being the strong one. You may find that you get support from someone you were not expecting it from. Try to be open to receiving that support. Also be willing to seek out people or groups for support if it is not readily available to you.

How do I deal with the reaction of others?

It is difficult for someone who has never lost a baby to comprehend what you are going through. Often people do not know what to say to you, and in their attempts to make you feel better they may say things that may make you upset or angry. Most people do not purposely try to be insensitive; they simply do not understand the impact the death of your baby has had on you. Some people do not understand the intimate relationship you and your baby already had since they were not able to experience the same close, tangible bond while you were pregnant.

The best way to deal with people when you are grieving is to **be honest** and *tell them what you need*. Instead of saying, "You just don't understand how I feel!" say, "I'm having a bad day, it really hurts my feelings when you say things like that." Some parents have found it helpful to write notes or letters to their family, friends, and/or coworkers explaining the circumstances surrounding their loss and what they need from them. Sometimes people are surprised at the depth of your feelings.

How can I best care for myself?

Take Care of Your Body—Your doctor should give you specific directions for your care after delivery. Taking care of your physical health is just as important as taking care of your emotional health. Even though you will not be caring for a newborn at home, the grief you will carry can be exhausting. Because grieving has a physical component it is very important to eat a balanced diet, exercise (even if it is just a walk around the block), drink plenty of water, and maintain a regular rest routine. Besides your emotional reactions, you will also be dealing with hormonal responses. Your body will go through the same hormonal and physical changes as you would if you had delivered a healthy baby. You can expect to experience mood swings, fatigue, insomnia, inability to concentrate, or irritability. Your energy levels can be erratic, as well as your appetite.

Find Support—There are many sources for support. Many people find it helpful to attend a pregnancy loss support group. You can also find online organizations designed to help grieving parents. For some, a close friend or relative can be of great comfort. If your sadness significantly interrupts your ability to function daily, it is important to contact your doctor or see a professional counselor.

Communicate—Tell others what you need, and be specific! Other than verbally expressing your needs, you can write notes or letters to friends, family and/or coworkers. Tell people what you need from them, especially when you want to talk about your baby, or even when you do not.

Take Care of Your Mind & Spirit—You may find a need for more spiritual bonds during this time. Contact clergy or simply set aside time for reflection or relaxation. Some people enjoy reading and writing; journaling your experience may be an important part of your healing process.

How can I memorialize my baby?

You can start by collecting anything that reminds you of your baby to create a memory box, keepsake book, and/or shadow box. Examples of items are...

- Sonogram pictures
- Pictures of yourself pregnant, even if you didn't know you were pregnant or look pregnant
- Pictures of your baby
- Hospital Birth Certificate
- Hospital bracelet
- Cards of congratulations before your loss
- Cards, flowers and gifts after your loss
- Footprint and handprint papers
- Permanent hand and foot prints
- Crib card, comb, or measuring tape
- Baby clothes and/or blanket
- Naming Ceremony/Baptism Booklet from Share
- Memory Book from Share

In the future you can...

- Arrange a special service or funeral
- Plant a special bush, tree, or garden
- Create a bracelet or jewelry
- Keep a journal
- Make donations to charities in memory of your baby

When a Baby is Born Still



A brief reference for those who have experienced the death of a baby after 20 weeks gestation.