

For many families, the instant you knew you were expecting a baby, your life changed forever. Throughout your pregnancy you may have felt excited. Maybe you already named your baby or purchased outfits for the baby, or you may have even completed 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 neonatal death 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 as well.

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 neonatal loss?***

A neonatal loss is the death of a baby who was born alive and died shortly after birth. The baby may have lived for a few days, a few hours or only minutes. The baby may have died for a variety of reasons, including pre-maturity, infection, defects of major organs or chromosomal abnormalities. The baby's life-threatening condition may or may not have been detectable before birth. The grief process may be impacted by the gestation of the pregnancy, and when problems were detected.

Whether you are parents who learned before or after birth, that your baby may die, the initial feelings you experience are very similar. You now have to go from the highs of awaiting a precious baby, to the lows of deep grief. Your emotions and feelings may be constantly changing with the circumstances of your loss.

## ***How can I expect to feel?***

**Some parents learn that their baby has a life-threatening condition during**

**pregnancy.** You may have been afraid to bond with your baby during the pregnancy once it was determined that your baby would likely die. It is not uncommon for parents to think that if they do not become attached to their baby that it will make the death easier to deal with. The opposite reaction is also normal. After delivery some parents are unable to leave their baby's side, wanting to be with them every moment of their short life, fearing that their son/daughter will die while they are apart. When the death of their baby is certain, some parents benefit from making choices, prior to delivery, regarding birth plans, baby's care and/or memorial services.

**Some parents do not know their baby is ill until after they are born and complications occur suddenly.** You may have been in shock and had a difficult time accepting that something was wrong with your baby. You may have had to make decisions very quickly after delivery. You may have been overwhelmed by the decisions you had to make and exhausted from the experience.

In either situation, it is normal to question your decisions or the decisions of the medical staff, wanting only what was best for your baby; to give him/her the best quality of life. After your baby died you may have felt cheated because you were not able to experience his/her life for very long or you may have felt grateful for the time that you did get to spend with your precious infant. You may have felt lost and alone. Not only has your baby died, but also the hopes and dreams you had planned for your future together. It is important for you to know that however you react to the devastating news and death of your baby is normal.

Your emotions and feelings may 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. While grieving, you may experience any or all of the emotions listed below:

- Jealousy
- Confusion
- Loss of Control
- Anger
- Disappointment
- Guilt/Self-blame

- Low Self-Esteem
- Denial
- Sadness/Depression
- Anxiety
- Failure

It is unlikely that you will experience these emotions in any order or as stages. The intense feelings of your grief will not last forever; there will come a time when the heartache is 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 lessens with time, and healing takes place. It is important for you to know what you are feeling is normal.

## ***How do I deal with the reaction of others?***

It is difficult for someone who has never experienced the death of 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 may say things that upset you or make you 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 you had 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. The same is true between you and your spouse. Some parents have even found it helpful to write notes or letters to their family, friends and co-workers explaining the circumstances surrounding their loss and what they need from others. Sometimes people are surprised at the depth of your feelings.

## ***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, or you may feel detached from your partner and have difficulty understanding how she is feeling. You

may feel a sense of helplessness, because you cannot control what has happened or fix things for your wife/partner and child. Or, perhaps you have put your feelings aside so you can be there to support her and make the decisions the two of you would have made together, if circumstances were different. This may leave you feeling torn and alone. Should you be strong for your partner or openly grieve for the loss you have experienced? It is important to remember that you also 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. 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. Fathers are not usually given much time off after the death of their baby and may feel torn about returning to work.

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. Be supportive of one another, but know it is all right to take the time to grieve without being the strong one. Also be willing to seek out people or groups for support if it is not readily available to you.

### ***How can I memorialize my baby?***

If your baby had a fatal condition that you knew of early on, you may have had the opportunity to make memorial decisions and arrangements before the baby's birth. Or, you may have had to make, what seemed like, unthinkable decisions in a short amount of time. Whether you decided to have a farewell ceremony with many family and friends or something private and small, collecting things that remind you of your baby may be helpful. Some examples might be...

- ultrasound pictures, or pictures of yourself pregnant
- pictures of your baby
- hospital birth certificate

- hospital bracelet
- cards, flowers and gifts from before and after your loss
- footprint and handprint certificates
- permanent hand and foot prints
- crib card, comb or measuring tape
- baby clothes and/or blanket
- memory book

In addition to, or in place of, a traditional farewell ritual you may also consider...

- planting a special bush, tree or garden
- creating a bracelet or other piece of jewelry
- keeping a journal
- making donations to charities or volunteer in memory of your baby
- naming ceremony
- taking part in memorial activities
- creating traditions unique to your child

### ***How can I best care for myself?***

**Take Care of Your Body** – Eat a balanced diet, exercise, drink plenty of water and maintain a regular rest routine.

**Find Support** – Surround yourself with supportive family and friends. Accept help when offered and seek help from your doctor or professional counselor if sadness significantly interrupts your ability to function.

**Communicate** – Express your feelings; talk, write, sing, exercise and cry. Tell others what you need and do not need. Be specific.

**Take Care of Your Mind & Spirit** – Rest, relax and reflect. Be patient. Look for comforting activities. Take part in memorial services.

## **The Loss of a Newborn**



***A brief reference for those experiencing the death of a baby in the first few months of life***