



Grieving Miscarriage, Stillbirth, or the Loss of a Newborn

Losing a baby triggers tremendous grief. Whether the baby died during pregnancy or after birth, parents experience heartbreak and devastating emotional pain. They not only grieve the loss of their son or daughter, but many personal intangible losses as well—the hopes and dreams they had cherished for this one unique, irreplaceable child.

Grief is the normal emotional recovery process people go through after a traumatic loss. Grieving takes a long time and cannot be rushed. The grief process is often described in terms of these stages:

- **Denial.** Our first reaction to overwhelming emotional pain is usually shock and disbelief: “No, this cannot be happening.” Denial is like an emotional anesthetic that protects us until we become able to deal with a painful reality.
- **Anger.** When denial wears thin, reality finally sinks in. Anger erupts. Anger may be directed at God, a doctor, “bad luck,” one’s spouse, self, or the world in general. Anger may be vented in a rational or an irrational way.
- **Guilt.** Self-directed anger may be accompanied by guilt, blaming oneself for what happened or for somehow failing to prevent it. For persons of religious faith, anger toward God may also stimulate guilt feelings. (Those feeling guilty for anger toward God may be comforted by the thought that God, who created the human emotional system, fully understands the anger of grief and is compassionate toward those who grieve.)
- **Depression.** This may be the longest lasting stage. This is the phase of true mourning, where one “hits bottom.” Depression may include periods of crying, feelings of sadness or hopelessness, irritability, difficulty concentrating, sleeplessness or sleeping too much, overeating or the loss of appetite.
- **Acceptance.** In the acceptance stage, parents finally come to terms with the loss of their baby. They face the reality that their lives will go forward without this daughter or son. The parent starts to feel like his or her former “normal” self once again.

Grieving people usually experience each of these stages, but not in a neat, orderly, linear fashion, as the list above may imply. Grief is actually quite “sloppy”—the stages overlap one another and the grieving person often slides back and forth between stages, sometimes slowly and other times rapidly, even moving through several stages in a single day. Needless to say, grief is emotionally and physically exhausting. Yet, grief is purposeful and necessary. The grieving process enables parents to eventually cope with their loss and move ahead with their lives.

People grieve in different ways. There is no “right” way to mourn the loss of one’s baby, and no timetable for accomplishing the work of grieving. It is important to be patient with one’s self, with

one's spouse, and with the grief process itself. It is not uncommon for a parent to grieve for up to two years or longer. A woman will begin to feel better and then receive a baby shower invitation in the mail and experience a setback. Similarly, Mother's Day or Father's Day, the anniversary of the loss, or the news that a friend is pregnant can send one back through the stages of grief. In time, significant healing does occur, and the pain of losing a baby does diminish.

Two Tips that May Help While Grieving

Many who have walked the painful path of grief have found these two things helpful:

1. Choose a tangible way to remember your baby. Some ideas:

- Make or purchase a "memory box" to preserve physical reminders of your baby. The box could contain hospital records, sympathy cards, photographs, a baby blanket, a hospital ID bracelet, a letter written by the parents to the baby, notes or drawings from the baby's siblings, etc.
- Plant a tree in memory of your baby.
- Create a baby book for the baby that died.
- Write a poem about your baby. Then frame it or preserve it in some other special way.

2. Seek support from those who have "been there."

Other parents who have experienced a miscarriage, stillbirth or loss of a newborn will understand how you feel. They have walked the same path you are walking now and they have struggled with the pain and loss you are presently experiencing. Talking with these parents can give you comfort and support during this difficult time. Don't allow yourself to become isolated in your grief. Seek out others who have "been there."

If you don't know anyone who has lost a baby, you may wish to connect with someone through the Compassionate Friends organization, which has nearly 600 chapters across the United States. The mission of this organization is "to assist families toward the positive resolution of grief following the death of a child of any age and to provide information to help others be supportive." For more information, visit their Web site at www.compassionatefriends.org. You can also call toll free at 877-969-0010 or send an email to: nationaloffice@compassionatefriends.org.