

Helping Your Family Heal After Stillbirth

by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

Few events in life bring about such warm and wonderful feelings of anticipation as the announcement of a pregnancy. As soon as you and your family learned you were expecting, you naturally began to have hopes and dreams for the future. These hopes and dreams take on a life of their own and begin to grow inside you, even as the baby was growing.

Yet when you come to grief and are “torn apart,” there is no longer a living baby to go with your hopes and dreams. You have come to grief before you were prepared to mourn. The stillbirth of this precious child is an inexplicable loss of a new life—to the parents, to the siblings this baby may have had, to the extended family, and to the friends of the family.

Many Share Your Pain...

More than two million babies are stillborn worldwide each year, about one in 160 pregnancies. Each baby's death is a tragedy. Most of the time the baby dies before labor begins, but sometimes the baby dies during labor (about 15 percent). These numbers represent many, many millions of people the world over who have been affected by stillbirth and whose grieving hearts are crying out for expression and support.

...Yet Many Do Not Understand

Sadly, many people around you may not know what to say or do to support and comfort you. There are no cultural norms for mourning the loss of someone who never lived outside the womb and was never formally welcomed into the larger community of family and friends.

Well-meaning friends and even family members may make your experience even more difficult by things they say and do. Someone may imply that the loss isn't tragic because “you can have another one.” Someone may say, “You didn't really get to know the baby” or “Now you have an angel in Heaven.” Of course, all you can think about is wanting your child in your loving arms.

Know that Numbness is Natural

During the first days and weeks after your baby's death, you are likely to feel shock, emotional numbness, and disbelief that any of this is real. These feelings are nature's way of temporarily protecting you from the full reality of the death. Like anesthesia, they help you survive the pain of your early grief. Numbness is natural and necessary early in your grief process.

Acknowledge Your Loss

Acknowledging that your heart is broken is the beginning of your healing. As you experience the pain of your loss—gently opening, acknowledging, and allowing, the suffering it will diminish. In fact, the resistance to the pain can be more painful than the pain itself. As difficult as it is, you must, slowly and in doses over time, embrace the pain of your grief. As Helen Keller said, “The only way to the other side is through.”

Express Your Grief

Grief is the thoughts and feelings you have on the inside about the death of your baby. When you express those feelings outside of yourself, that is called mourning. Mourning is talking about the death, crying, writing in a journal, making art, participating in a support group, or any activity that moves your grief from the inside to the outside. Mourning is how you heal your grief.

Be Compassionate with Yourself

The word compassion literally means “with passion.” So, self-compassion means caring for oneself “with passion.” While we hope you have excellent outside support, brochure is intended to help you be kind to yourself as you confront and eventually embrace your grief over the death of your baby.

Many of us are hard on ourselves when we are in mourning. We often have inappropriate expectations of how “well” we should be doing with our grief. We are told to “carry on,” “keep your chin up,” and “keep busy.” Actually, when we are in grief we need to slow down, turn inward, embrace our feelings of loss, and seek and accept support.

Remembering Your Baby

To heal in grief, it is important to remember your baby and commemorate this precious being whose life ended much too soon. It is good for you to share or display photos of your baby, even photos of the baby after she died. It is good to talk about your son, both happy and sad memories of your pregnancy as well as his birth and death. It is good to cherish a blanket or item of clothing that touched your daughter’s precious body before you had to say goodbye. It is good to use his name when you are talking about him to others.

Help Siblings Mourn

If you have other children, they are also experiencing the pain of this loss. After a stillbirth, grieving siblings are often “forgotten mourners.” This means that parents, extended family, friends, and society may overlook that they have also lost someone they love.

Siblings may indirectly express their grief. They may show some regressive behaviors, like wanting to sleep with mom and dad, clinging to parents more often, or asking to be taken care of in ways they were when they were younger. They may also display sadness, anger, or anxiety through behaviors such as irritability, blame, distractibility, decreased motivation at school, and disorganization.

Grieving siblings need adults to be open and honest with them about the death. They need to know that it is okay to talk about the baby by name and about the baby’s death. They need to be reassured that their grief is important too. They need their unique thoughts and feelings acknowledged by others.

Understand the Idea of Reconciliation

You will not “recover” from the stillbirth of your precious child. You are not ill. Your heart is broken and you are torn apart by this loss. You are not the same person today as you were before your baby died.

This does not mean you will live in misery, though. Remember, when you mourn your grief, you not only heal, but you transform as you move through to the other side of your grief. Your life can potentially be deeper and more meaningful even after the death of your precious child.

When you have begun to reconcile your grief, the sharp pangs of sorrow soften, the constant painful memories subside. A renewed interest in the future begins to overtake the natural obsession with the past and the death. You experience more happy than sad in your days. You begin to set new goals and begin to work toward them. You bond with other people and develop close relationships with others again, less fearful of losing them. You experience life fully again.

Believe In Your Capacity to Heal

In moments when you do not believe you will get through another day, cling to the belief that you will survive. Part of healing is believing that there is a path to reconciliation and that you have the capacity within you to heal. Remember, the path to healing is to find ways that feel right for you to actively, openly mourn this death.