

Grief after your baby dies

This information sheet aims to answer some commonly asked questions about grief after your baby dies. Informed consent and woman centred care are integral to health care in Queensland. Decisions about your care are always up to you.

IMPORTANT: This is general information only. Ask your doctor, midwife or nurse about your own situation.

We understand this is a very difficult and sad time for you and your family. This information sheet contains important information about this difficult time

What is grief?

There is no right or wrong way to feel. Each person's experience of grief is different and finding the support you need is important. Discuss with your healthcare provider how you are feeling and what supports are available to you.

Everyone grieves differently. There are no rules about how you should feel or behave.

You and your partner may show your grief in different ways. The way you grieve is affected by many things including your gender, culture, personality, and outlook.

Grief may occur after the death of your baby but may also be delayed and not appear until sometime after the loss has occurred. Some parents say that their grief is stronger at some times than others. For many parents, the death of their baby brings a grief that is unexpected, deep, intense, overwhelming, and often long lasting.

Try to talk about your thoughts and feelings, and how you would like to remember your baby. Be patient and caring with each other. It is important to talk with each other, as relationships can be affected by grief.

Signs of grief

Some people find it easy to express their feelings and ask people for support. Some people can be more reluctant to talk and may want to remain private in their grief.

Strong feelings are very common. Some signs of grief may include:

- crying and sadness
- anger, anxiety, or guilt
- feeling numb or unable to enjoy things as you usually do
- trouble getting to sleep or staying asleep
- changes to your eating habits (increase in unhealthy foods or no appetite at all)
- having trouble concentrating or making decisions
- feeling sick or tense

It is important to recognise the difference between grief, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after a significant loss. The symptoms can be very similar, and it is not always easy to tell them apart. Seek support from your healthcare provider if you are struggling to cope with everyday life, have feelings of self-harm, or your symptoms of grief are getting worse.

How long can grief last?

Everyone is different. There is no 'right' length of time for grief to last. At times it might seem you will never feel 'normal' again. Many parents say their grief is life-long and they just find ways of coping with it. Some may even feel guilty when there are happy life moments again.

Parents who have had a baby that has died often recall many ups and downs before they began to enjoy life again.

Sometimes this means creating a new 'normal'. Allowing yourself the time and space to grieve and finding the support you need from others is important.



Taking care of yourself

Remember, it's OK if you cannot go back to doing things the way you used to or enjoying life in the same way. You may have feelings of great sadness when you hear your baby's name or go into the room at home that they were going to have.

Some parents have found other ways to help with their grief. These could be connecting with other parents who are grieving, writing about how they feel (journaling) and doing art therapy. Talking to a social worker, psychologist or counsellor may help.

You also need to recover after your pregnancy and giving birth. Some things you can do:

- eat a healthy diet and stay away from unhealthy food options
- try to do something active every day such as going for a walk
- avoid alcohol and drink plenty of water
- avoid smoking and stay away from cigarette smoke
- ask for advice about managing your breastmilk

Telling family and friends

Telling family members and friends about the death of your baby can be difficult. You don't need to tell everyone immediately; you can tell people when you feel ready. If you feel ready you can talk about your baby as much as you wish.

Family and friends may be waiting for news of the birth, and will probably have questions about the sex, weight, and name of your baby. You can help set the tone of the conversation with words like "I have some sad news". Only give details, such as how your baby died, if you feel comfortable doing this.

If you are not ready to tell people about what has happened, you might ask a close family member or friend to do this for you.

You may find it helpful to tell your family and friends what help they could give you, such as taking other children out, helping with the laundry or providing some meals.

Other peoples reactions

Your family and friends will also be affected by your baby's death. You may find it hard to deal with their feelings while you are grieving yourself. It might be helpful to remind yourself that people react in different ways.

You might find that people are shocked and may not know what to do or say. At times their comments might seem unhelpful or even hurtful, or there may be long silences. Some people might say things to try to make you feel better. Others may stay away or not contact you because they may not know what to say or do.

Sometimes people say unhelpful things while they are trying to do their best to support you. You might want to tell them it's okay if they don't know what to say. You could tell them you won't forget the baby who has died and suggest they call the baby by their name (if that's what you want).

You may also find it hard to go back to work immediately. No-one can tell you when the "time is right" to go back to work or returning to your usual day to day activities. Talking about it with someone you trust may help you decide.

Telling other children

Telling other children in the family that a baby has died can be difficult. How and what you tell them will depend on their age, stage of development and their relationship with your baby. Children have different needs and will have different responses to the baby's death. You might like to ask them how they would like to remember their brother or sister.

Children may feel angry and confused, or they may become clingy or may say rude or uncaring things. Younger children may not understand what is different and act like nothing has changed for them. Older children may feel afraid, have difficult behaviour, or need special attention after your baby has died. They may worry they did something to cause the baby's death or that they are going to die also.

Sometimes you may feel that you do not have time to grieve as your children, particularly if young children, keep you busy with their demands and what they are doing. Ask for help from family, friends, or your healthcare provider if you need.

Helping children grieve

Talking to your children and telling them what happened will help them cope better. A grief counsellor can help them work through their feelings. Your child's school may have these. You can read stories to young children that are available from libraries, funeral homes, or school to help them understand about death.

Some other things you can do are:

- use simple truthful words like "the baby was very small"
- encourage them to talk about the baby and how they are feeling
- ask them to think of ways to remember the baby such as drawing a picture or making something to keep
- tell the children's teacher(s) or day care workers about the baby's death

Ways to remember your baby

You will always be reminded of the baby that died and wonder what they would have been like if they had lived.

Some things that may help are:

- collect things that remind you of your baby
- have a service for your baby
- write your thoughts and feelings in a journal
- light a candle
- plant a small shrub in a pot to honour your baby
- choose a symbol to remember your baby, such as a bird or butterfly, that feels closely connected to you when you see it
- have a piece of jewellery made with your baby's initials or birthstone

Support and information

Your friends, family, doctor, and hospital staff can offer you comfort, support and information at this time.

SANDS (13 000 SANDS or 13 000 72637) provide support and information to parents and families who experience miscarriage, stillbirth, and neonatal and infant death www.sands.org.au

Bears of Hope—Pregnancy & Infant Loss Support (1300 11 HOPE or 1300 11 4673) ongoing comfort, support and counselling to parents and families who have experienced the loss of a baby during pregnancy, birth, and infancy www.bearsofhope.org.au

Heartfelt (1800 583 768) volunteer organisation of professional photographers who provide photographic memories to families. All services are provided free of charge www.heartfelt.org.au

Lifeline (13 11 14) telephone crisis support service www.lifeline.org.au

Red Nose Grief and Loss (1300 308 307) 24-hour bereavement support and counselling to families who have experienced stillbirth or the sudden and unexpected death of a child, regardless of the cause www.rednosegriefandloss.com.au

Centrelink (Family Assistance Office) (13 61 50) provides financial assistance including maternity allowances and bereavement payments www.humanservices.gov.au

Registrar of Births, Deaths, and Marriages (Queensland) (1300 366 430) The registry records and maintains birth and death registrations in Queensland and issues certificates www.qld.gov.au/law/births-deaths-marriages-and-divorces

13HEALTH (13 432584) telephone support providing health information, referral and services www.qld.gov.au/health/contacts/advice/13health

Australian Breastfeeding Association (1800 686 268) comprehensive advice regarding lactation and milk suppression after your baby dies. www.breastfeeding.asn.au/resources/lactation-after-your-baby-dies