

# Grief after your baby dies

This information sheet aims to answer some commonly asked questions about grief after your baby dies.

**IMPORTANT:** Talk to your health care provider about your individual circumstances.

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

## What is grief?

Grief is a reaction to the death of your baby. There is no right or wrong way to feel. Each parent's grief journey is different and finding the support you need is important.

Strong feelings are very common. Deep sadness, anxiety, fear, anger, guilt, helplessness and despair are just some of the emotions you might experience. Physical reactions such as tiredness, loss of appetite and difficulty concentrating or remembering things are also very common.

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 long lasting.

## How long will your grief last?

Everyone is different. There is no 'right' 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.

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.

## How do you tell your 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.

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 up to telling people about what has happened, you might ask a close family member or friend to do this for you.

Your family and friends will 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).

If people ask questions about your baby tell them if that's okay or if you don't want to answer questions, tell them you are not ready to talk about your baby yet. Thank them for their patience and support.

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

## How do you tell your 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. They may worry they did something to cause the baby's death or that they are going to die also.

Children feel angry and confused too and they may become clingy or may say rude or uncaring things. Older children may feel afraid, have naughty behaviour or need special attention after your baby has died.

Sometimes you may feel that you do not have time to grieve as your children, particularly young children, keep you busy and pre-occupied with their demands and what they are doing.

## How do help your other children grieve?

Talking to your children and telling them what happened will help them cope better. Tell them they are not to blame for the baby's death and that they are not going to die.

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 home 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"
- avoid saying things like "The baby is sleeping"
- encourage them to talk about the baby and how they are feeling
- ask them to think of ways to remember the baby such drawing a picture or making something to keep
- tell the children's teacher(s) or day care workers about the baby's death

## Where can you get help and support?

You can help and support from health care providers such as your GP, a social worker or mental health worker. Some people find joining support groups helpful.

## Do people grieve differently?

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

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

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.

Generally, women want to talk about their grief. They often show their emotions more and may cry or get angry a lot. Women are more likely to ask for help from family, friends or other support person such as a counsellor.

Usually men do not work through their grief openly. They may try to hide their pain and may not want to talk about the baby's death. Men sometimes want to do things to keep their minds off the loss. They often want to fix things and feel helpless when they can't. Often men just need space and may choose to disappear into another room in the house for a while. They may also benefit from speaking with a friend or grief counsellor.

## How can you take care of yourself?

Forgive yourself if you cannot go back to doing things the way you used to or enjoying life in the same way.

If your sad feelings are still very strong after a couple of weeks and they prevent you from doing the usual things, you may need some additional help.

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. Talking to a social worker or counsellor may help. Treatments can help you feel better.

Some parents have found other ways to help with their grief such as writing about how they feel (journaling), doing art therapy and connecting with other parents who are grieving.

Sometimes women may develop postnatal depression or one or both parents may develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Help is available for both of you. If you are thinking about suicide or death then ask for urgent help. There are some contact numbers at end of this brochure or speak with your GP or other health care provider.

You also need to recover after your pregnancy as any mother does. Some things you can do:

- eat a healthy diet and stay away from junk food
- 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
- if you are stopping your milk supply ask for advice on how to do this
- see your health care provider if you have excessive vaginal bleeding

## How do you tell work mates when your baby has died?

It may be hard to tell your boss and workmates that your baby has died. You may want to ask a family member or close friend to do this for you. You may want to send an email to let them know and what information you feel comfortable with them telling your work mates. A social worker or counsellor can also help you with this.

You may find it hard to go back to work if there are other pregnant women there. No-one can tell you when the “time is right” to go back to work. Talking about it with someone you trust may help you decide.

## What if you lose one baby from a multiple pregnancy?

If you were expecting twins or triplets (or more) you may have very mixed up feeling if one of your babies dies.

You may feel sad about not having time to grieve for the baby that has died if you are caring for the one(s) who live(s). If your living baby is sick you may feel scared that they will die too.

Other people including family and friends may find it hard to talk about the baby that died as they don't want to make you feel sad.

You may find it hard in the future to celebrate special days such as their birthday especially if it is the same day that one baby died.

## What can you do 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
- have a piece of jewellery made with your baby's initials or birthstone

## Comfort, 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): provides support and information to parents and families who experience miscarriage, stillbirth and neonatal and infant death [www.sands.org.au](http://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](http://www.bearsofhope.org.au)

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

**Lifeline** (13 11 40): a national charity providing ANYONE experiencing a personal crisis with access to 24 hour crisis support and suicide prevention services

**Red Nose Grief and Loss** (1300 308 307): a 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 [rednosegriefandloss.com.au](http://rednosegriefandloss.com.au)

**Centrelink (Family Assistance Office)** (13 61 50): provides financial assistance including maternity allowances and bereavement payments [www.humanservices.gov.au](http://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](http://www.qld.gov.au/law/births-deaths-marriages-and-divorces)

**13HEALTH** (13 43 25 84) for health information, advice or referral services 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.