

WHEN A BABY DIES

“At least you didn’t bring it home.”

“Luckily you never really knew the baby.”

“You’re young, you can have another.”

Do these statements sound familiar? Obstetrics is supposed to be the “happy” place. When tragedy strikes there, it is perhaps doubly unexpected. The true tragedy is that most people are unaware of the feelings women have when they deliver a premature, defective or stillborn child. Parents of premature infants and of those with congenital defects experience grief even if their children live, because those parents have lost their anticipated perfect child. If stillbirth or neonatal death occurs, comments like those quoted above are well meant but are far from helpful.

Those who lost newborns or who have experienced stillbirth have found it common for many people not to recognize the loss as being quite as tragic as the loss of an older child. The death of an infant is often considered “an unfortunate occurrence” but one that can easily be rectified by the birth of another child. Such a replacement is rarely assumed when an older child dies. Often none but immediate family members see the child. Because of that, most people feel the baby did not exist as a “real” person and they cannot begin to be aware of the love, the hope, the self-confidence and the future that was lost with that child.

Because of some special circumstances shared only by parents of infants who have died before or shortly after birth, we write this article to describe briefly some of the unique needs to which The Compassionate Friends responds.

Unlike parents who have lost older children, parents of newborns have no memories. If they are lucky, there is a picture, a lock of hair – a footprint. Some were never able to hold or even see their babies. Often there are only dreams and the memories of a few moments, hours or days.

Giving birth to a defective child often brings questions of self-worth. “What did I do?” “Will I ever have a healthy baby?” There is a compound grief over the birth as well as the death of the child.

Physical recovery puts an added Strain on Bereavement. Mothers commonly are not a part of funeral arrangements, if indeed there is a funeral, due to the need for them to stay in the hospital. This loss of involvement can become a block to final separation and to a healthy grieving process. There are the physical reminders of having given birth – but empty arms. Erratic hormonal shifts during physical recovery cause “postpartum blues” under normal conditions. When the baby dies, the mother’s weakened physical state and normal hormonal mood swings make the initial grief that much more intense.

Parents whose infant has died are often not considered to be, or to have been parents. That kind of attitude held by others causes parents to feel that there is something wrong with them because of the deep grief they feel, and makes them feel that they should be able to forget this “unfortunate thing” and go back to their normal lives quickly. Meanwhile, phantom crying, a common occurrence, haunts them as a sign of mental imbalance. If the baby was the first, Mother will often feel in limbo, suddenly having no role or purpose in life. She may have resigned her position to prepare for a new stage in life – motherhood. Now, not a mother, nor employed in her prior position, what is she? Self-image shaken – where is her meaning?

The death of an infant will have an effect on sexual intimacy. If a couple decides she will become pregnant again, they might find themselves dealing with the grief over their baby’s death as well as the fear generated by the new pregnancy and its potential consequences. Sexual disharmony is common due to fears of future failures, guilt for having pleasure and memories of how their dead child was created.

The father of the baby is often passed over, even by people who are sympathetic to the loss. "How is your wife doing?" they ask, while fathers own feelings are overlooked more than if the child were older. After all, they reason, only mother carried and bore that child. They cannot understand that the baby, the hopes, aspirations and expectations are as much his as his wife's. But he must go out and face the world in his role of worker, withholding his grief as society expects him to, so that he can function "appropriately" in his roles. He may be forced to repress his feelings.

If there are older children in the family, these siblings find it hard to grieve if they never saw the baby. They may not fully comprehend what has happened or what is making Mommy and Daddy act the way they do. For a child it is hard to separate from a brother or sister he has never seen – hard to separate fact from fantasy. Depending on the age of the sibling, there may be fantasies about the baby: how he or she looked, where the baby went, etc. Jealously toward the expected child may turn to guilt, believing that such wishes caused the baby to die.

Although there are some special problems faced by couples that have lost newborns, it is important to be aware of the common feelings that all grieving parents share. We share the sense of helplessness, the severe alterations of day-to-day living, and the seemingly never-ending grief. We all go through the same stages: the shock, the denial, the anger and depression, and hopefully the eventual reconciliation. These special messages are stressed.

*Remember that your baby was indeed a person - an important part of your life.
Someone else remembers with you through The Compassionate Friends.
You have just as much right to grieve as anyone, no matter how brief your baby's life.
This is a time to be selfish - don't let other people make the decisions for you.*

With all of our differences and our special needs, there are basically more similarities than differences between parents who have lost newborns and those who lost older children. Who can compare one against the other, anyway! Just as all our children's deaths were different, so too are all our grieving experiences. The most important bond we share is our need for each other to encourage and help ourselves in the rebuilding of our lives.

-From the TCF US National Newsletter

(Lovingly lifted as it appeared in TCF/St. Louis, MO – May/June 1987 newsletter and used in the Infant packets of TCF/Regina, SK chapter.)