

Parents & the Grieving Process

Grief is an intense, lonely, and personal experience. Everyone learns about grief and grieving in the course of natural separation that occurs during infancy and childhood and through their encounters with the deaths of loved ones. The death of an elderly loved one is mourned, but is usually expected. The sudden death of a baby, however, is usually an unexpected event. When a baby dies, not only does it destroy the dreams and hopes of the parents, but it also forces all family members to face an event for which they are unprepared. Most parents who experience the death of a baby describe the pain that follows as the most intense they have ever experienced. Many parents wonder if they will be able to tolerate the pain, to survive it, and to be able to feel that life has meaning again.

The intense pain that parents experience when their baby dies may be eased somewhat if they have insight into what has helped other parents overcome a similar grief. For example, one of the most important things for parents to realize is that recovery from the loss of a baby takes time. Each person will have to establish his or her own method of recovery. There is no right or wrong way to grieve, but there is a pattern to the resolution of grief, and there is help available to family members. It is crucial that parents realize that they are not alone and that others have experienced such grief and have survived.

Often the first reaction of a parent after the death of a baby is of shock, disbelief, denial or numbness. These reactions are instinctive and soften the impact of the death until the parent is better prepared to face the reality and the finality of the baby's death. These reactions, as normal as they are, can be deceptive to others who are unacquainted with the grieving process. They may incorrectly assume that the parent either is strong and holding up well, or is insensitive and incapable of expressing his or her feelings about the loss. What they fail to realize is that shock, disbelief, denial and numbness allow the parents to begin to face the tragic occurrence without losing control. Many parents have said that they seem to be functioning in a fog during the first few weeks after the baby's death. Some parents describe their experience at the wake or funeral as being an observer or not really being emotionally involved. Each of these reactions are nature's way of helping the parents confront the death of the baby. These reactions may last minutes, hours, days or weeks. The parent will determine subconsciously when he or she is better able to face the death. Crying, or some similar emotional release, usually marks the end of this initial period of grief.

When the baby's death becomes a reality to the family, intense suffering and pain usually begin. During the weeks and months that follow, many parents say that they are frightened by the intensity and the variety of the feelings that they experience. Crying, weeping and incessant talking are all normal reactions. The parent may find that he or she feels very alone. Parents may express their grief differently and may have difficulty sharing their feelings. Relatives and friends may be uncomfortable with the actuality of death, busy with their own lives or unable to meet the parent's needs for comfort and support. For some parents, help may be obtained from the clergy, physician, counselors, other bereaved parents or willing friends and relatives. It is important to remember, however, that no one can resolve the parent's grief but the parents themselves. Resolution can be achieved only by experiencing and working through these emotions.

It is important for the parents to allow themselves full expression of the emotions they feel. It is vital that emotions not be held in for a "correct time." It is necessary for parents to express their emotions, though not necessarily in words, to gain a resolution to their baby's death. Emotions that parents may experience include guilt, anger, fear and depression.

- *Guilt.* As the parents try to understand the reason their baby died, they may develop feelings of guilt. Parents may blame themselves for something they did, or neglected to do, during the pregnancy. Parents may also blame each other. "If only" becomes a familiar phrase. In the case of stillbirth, mothers may shoulder most of the burden of guilt because they were carrying the baby. Fathers may feel guilty that they didn't feel as connected to the baby as the mother. It can be extremely beneficial for parents to talk with people who will encourage the expression of these feelings of guilt and help them understand those feelings more clearly.
- *Anger.* Depending on his or her personality, a parent may express feelings ranging from mild anger to rage. Parents can feel angry at themselves, their spouse, the physician or the baby for having died. Religious beliefs may be questioned and parents may find themselves angry with a God who allows babies to die. These thoughts, though normal and experienced by many grieving parents, may cause an extreme amount of anxiety. Anger that is left unreleased may be suppressed and may manifest itself at an inappropriate time or place or in an inappropriate manner. Anger can be expressed healthily and worked through in a number of ways: screaming in private, hitting something or strenuous exercise.
- *Fear.* After the death of their baby, many parents experience an overall sense of fear that something else horrible is going to happen. Often, parents with other children become extremely over-protective of them. At the same time, they may find themselves fearful of their responsibilities. After the death of their baby, many parents find it is difficult to concentrate for any length of time. Their minds wander, making it difficult to read, write or make decisions. Sleep may be disrupted, leaving parents overtired and edgy. Even if getting enough sleep, parents may still feel exhausted. Those in grief may experience physical symptoms centering on the heart, in the stomach or throughout muscles. Many times parents feel an irresistible urge to escape. As normal as all these reactions are, grieving parents often fear that they are "going crazy." Talking about these feelings with other parents who have experienced a similar loss can be extremely helpful for some grieving parents.
- *Depression.* As the parents continue to work through their grief, depression can occur. Depression can take different forms for different parents. Some parents may feel constantly down, unhappy or sad; others may feel worthless or as though somehow they have failed. Many are continually lethargic, tired or listless. This may be an ideal time for parents, with the help of family or friends, to become involved in some type of activity. Caution should be taken to avoid frantic activity, which, like running away, avoids facing the reality of the baby's death. Grieving parents, in the midst of deep depression, may feel that life has little meaning for them. As the parents begin to recover, depression will lift slowly. Down times will come and go, but the time between downs will become longer.

Resolution and Recovery

As the finality of the baby's death becomes a reality for the parents, recovery begins. Parents start to take an active part in life and their lives begin to have meaning once more. The pain of their baby's death becomes less intense, but is not forgotten. Holidays and anniversaries can trigger periods of intense pain and suffering. As time passes, the painful days become less frequent. There is no set time in which recovery takes place after a baby dies. The only comforting thought that one can give a parent is that it does occur, the process is slow, but it will happen. Parents need to be patient and loving with themselves, their spouses and their families.