

After the Sudden Death of a Baby

There is no more devastating loss than the death of an infant. This booklet offers some words of sympathy and support for those who are going through the grief of the loss of a baby, especially those deaths that are sudden and unexpected. Please read through this and feel that you can ask for help from others, such as friends, family, or the resources listed here.

For Parents:

Parents feel tremendous grief due to the loss of their child, and some parents also have additional feeling of guilt following the unexpected death of an infant. It is normal for parents to feel guilt, and to ask themselves what they could have done to prevent the death since it is their job to protect their child. A parent's bond with their child can never be broken because the love that has been shared will always remain. The mothers' grief may be more complicated by physical symptoms if she suddenly stopped breastfeeding or is healing from the delivery of the baby.

For grandparents

Sometimes, the bereavement of grandparents can go unrecognized because so much attention is on the parent's grief. As a grandparent, you are most certainly entitled to such feelings of loss. Grandparents can feel double grief - for death of the infant and the bereavement your child is experiencing. Many grandparents find it helpful to seek support from other bereaved grandparents or non-family members. Offering love and support to other grieving grandchildren can be a therapeutic process for all.

For siblings

Young children should be told as much about the loss as they are able to understand. Adults are encouraged to be open and honest about how the baby died. Parents and other caring adults can help young children to express what they are feeling and ask questions about the death. Avoid saying things



like: “the baby went away” or “the baby is sleeping in peace,” as these phrases may be misunderstood by the child. Provide security, love and affection for all siblings as they grieve. Older children may experience grief in a variety of ways depending on their age and developmental level. It is not uncommon for children to react by being angry or lashing out because they think adults could have prevented the death or grieving in spurts. Adults can aid in a child's healing process by providing them with open lines of communication and encouraging them to express their feelings.

For caregivers

The death of an infant will affect everyone who has cared for the baby. Despite their grief, caregivers, such as baby sitters, friends, and child care providers, may be left out of the group who receives support, even though they also loved and cared for the baby. It is important for caregivers to also know about grief and use resources to help with recovery.



TASKS OF GRIEVING

Moving on may be described as a process, rather than a decision; like a roller coaster ride as opposed to a stroll.

- Accept the reality of the loss. Disbelief and denial often follow a death. Your first task in grieving the loss of your infant is to accept that your child has died, that nothing may have prevented the death, and that you will not ever have your baby back.
- Experience the pain of grief. Allowing yourself to feel the pain rather than suppressing it can be beneficial in the resolution of mourning. Allowing yourself to express and release your emotions will help you to move forward through grief.
- Adjust to a new life. The grace to accommodate the changes in your life without your baby will come as the pain of grief is released and begins to subside. It may take some time to make adjustments, and you may struggle with certain issues for a while before you are able to imagine life without your baby.
- Moving forward. Eventually, you will find yourself once again enjoying the people and activities that brought you pleasure before your baby was born. However, this may be mixed with times when you have feelings of guilt or regret. Your completion of the tasks of grief may be indicated by your realization that there are other people in the world who care about you and want and need your love. Being able to care for others is a sign of recovery and does not mean you love your baby any less.

Adapted from: Worden, J.W. (1991). *Grief counseling and grief therapy: A handbook for the mental health practitioner* (2nd ed.). London: Springer.



Recognize

The grief that parents and families feel after the loss of a child is one of the most overwhelming types of grief possible. You may feel angry, sad, hopeless, or out of control. Most parents feel guilty about what happened, even though it is usually not their fault that the baby has died. Grief is powerful, and it can be exhausting and make you feel vulnerable and disorganized. Recognize that you may need a break from work or school, and that you may need help. For some, the most difficult step in healing is accepting help from others, such as friends, family, faith leaders, or a professional grief counselor.

Remember

People can find comfort in honoring the memory of the baby with actions such as: planting a tree, writing a poem, or creating a memory box. Keeping the memory of your baby alive can help you manage the very strong sad feelings of loss.

How to help someone who is grieving

Be a good listener: Grieving people need to talk about their loss and it is ok to acknowledge that they have been through a difficult experience. Offer your shoulder to cry on and let them cry with you. Crying helps the release of emotions, and that helps with healing. Be in touch with them - drop in, call them on the phone, write a letter, send an email. Remember special days such as birthdays and anniversaries will be hard. Be a Friend: Often being present and available is what someone who is grieving needs.

Share

It is important to share the story of your loss. Friends and family usually provide the most comfort, but they will never completely be able to understand your pain, and they may feel that their presence will cause you more pain. Let them know when you want to talk. By sharing your story and your feelings, you are helping others recognize the difficulty that you face.

Celebrate

Your baby's birthday, holidays, and other events that are important in your life will be difficult to face. But it is OK to celebrate your baby's life, no matter how brief.

Feel

It is hard to get beyond the overpowering feeling of grief. As time goes by, you may find that you are able to let go of this feeling a bit. You may start to feel more positive emotions such as being happy or content. This may take a long time, months or years. But as your feeling change, you may be able to think more clearly and start to be more at peace.

Continue

Many people feel that returning to daily life after the death of their baby seems to dishonor the memory of the baby. However, as you continue to get back to doing what is important to you and your family, such as returning to work or school, visiting with friends, previous family routines, etc.—will help you return to a regular schedule but not remove the memory of your baby.

Resources for Grief and Healing

Vermont 211: <http://www.vermont211.org/>

Text VT to 741741: <http://mentalhealth.vermont.gov/how-get-help>

Compassionate Friends: <https://www.compassionatefriends.org/>

For Vermont resources for grieving families: call the VT Department of Health at 1-800-464-4343 or your local VDH District Office: <http://www.healthvermont.gov/local>

First Candle: <https://firstcandle.org/>