

Death of a baby

Miscarriage, stillbirth or neonatal death (death of a newborn infant) is a shattering event for any couple expecting a baby. Everyone reacts and responds in different ways.

Common reactions

Some common grief reactions include:

- **Shock and disbelief** – many couples report feeling numb and empty when they learn their baby has died. Normal grief reactions include shock, physical pain, loss, anger, sadness and guilt.
- **Guilt** – guilt, anger and blame are normal reactions. For example, parents worry that something they did or didn't do during the pregnancy caused the baby's death.
- **Isolation** – friends and relatives may not know how to handle the situation and choose to avoid the grieving couple, or they may lend support for a month or two before leaving the couple to cope alone.
- **Relationship conflict** – people may grieve in different, and sometimes conflicting, ways. Men and women may cope and express their feelings very differently. This can cause friction within the relationship. However, contrary to popular belief, most couples stay together after the death of a baby.
- **Lack of acknowledgment of grief** – if the grief of parents is not recognised or acknowledged, the parents can feel very unsupported.

Miscarriage may go unrecognised by others

Losing a baby by miscarriage can be particularly isolating. If the baby dies during the first trimester, it is possible that most people didn't even know the couple was expecting a baby. Other difficulties include:

- **The suddenness of the miscarriage** – it may be over before anyone has time to do anything to stop it.
- **Lack of ritual** – a couple who experiences a miscarriage doesn't have the opportunity to express their grief through rituals such as a funeral and burial.
- **Understanding** – often there is no medical explanation for a woman's miscarriage. This can leave the couple feeling guilty, anxious and fearful of another miscarriage.

The lingering distress of SIDS

Sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) is the sudden and unexpected death of a baby, where the cause of death is unknown. Concerns for the grieving couple include:

- Never knowing what caused their baby to die
- Guilt or self-blame that somehow they were responsible for the baby's death
- The distress of police and coronial involvement
- The autopsy of their baby
- Ignorance of others about SIDS, which may mean the parents do not receive support and may even be blamed for the death of their child.

The months and years ahead

The couple may experience painful reminders, from expected and unexpected sources, including:

- The pregnancies and newborn babies of friends and relatives.
- Packing away the layette – items bought for the baby such as a cot, pram and clothes must be stored or given away.
- Special dates – such as the child's birthday or estimated due date.
- Family occasions – such as Christmas, Mother's Day or Father's Day.

- For months or even years, the couple may note when their child was due to reach certain milestones, such as crawling, walking and talking.
- The couple may have to deal with well-meaning questions such as 'How many children do you have?' and 'Was it a girl or a boy?' if meeting acquaintances who don't know the baby has died.
- The couple may be excessively vigilant or protective over later children.
- They may feel anxiety and fear during subsequent pregnancies or when subsequent babies are asleep or sick.

Suggestions for the grieving couple

Suggestions include:

- Acknowledge painful anniversaries – such as your child's birthday – by creating your own rituals.
- Take your time with the difficult task of packing or giving away the layette; dealing with the physical reminders of your expectations and hopes is an important and often painful part of grieving.
- Talk to your doctor and other health care professionals about the cause of your baby's death. Reassure yourself that it wasn't your fault.
- Contact bereavement services or self-help groups such as SIDS and Kids Victoria, Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Support (SANDS) or the Bonnie Babes Foundation for information, advice and support.
- Seek counselling.
- Talk with your partner. Remember that grief is an individual experience and different people grieve in different ways. Seek counselling together if your relationship is suffering.
- Get in touch with other bereaved parents. Organisations such as those listed above have trained parent supporters and offer support groups.

Subsequent pregnancies

Many couples who experience a miscarriage or stillbirth choose to try again for a child. However, pregnancy can be an anxious and bewildering time until the health and survival of the new baby is assured. Some reactions include:

- Emotionally reliving the death of your child
- Feeling that conceiving another child will 'betray' the child who has died
- Anxiety that the next baby will also die
- Lack of confidence in yourselves as competent parents because you couldn't prevent the death of your baby.

Suggestions for subsequent pregnancies

Suggestions for any further pregnancies include:

- If your baby died from a genetic disorder, try to find out as much as you can about the disorder and seek genetic counselling.
- If you are pregnant again, starting a pregnancy diary may help you work through your thoughts and feelings, both positive and negative.
- Tell your doctor and other health care professionals of your feelings. Expect and ask for sensitive emotional support during subsequent pregnancies.

Where to get help

- SIDS and Kids Victoria Tel. (03) 9822 9611 or 1300 308 307 – support for families affected by the sudden and unexpected death of a baby or young child
- Your doctor
- National Association of Loss and Grief (NALAG) Tel. (03) 9650 3000 or 1800 100 023 – for referral to an accredited grief counsellor
- Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Support (SANDS) Tel. (03) 9899 0218
- Bonnie Babes Foundation Tel. (03) 9803 1800

Things to remember

- Miscarriage, stillbirth or death of a newborn infant is a shattering event for any couple expecting a baby and everyone responds in different ways.

- If your baby died from a genetic disorder, seek genetic counselling.
- Contact bereavement services such as SANDS, SIDS and Kids Victoria or the Bonnie Babes Foundation for information, advice and support.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

SIDS and Kids Victoria

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