

Frontline

This newsletter is dedicated to professional caregivers. It is our hope this newsletter will help you give comfort and strength to those you serve.

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HELPING YOUR FAMILY HEAL AFTER A STILLBIRTH



By Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

Few events in life bring about such warm and wonderful feelings of anticipation as the announcement of a pregnancy. As soon as you learned you were expecting, you naturally had hopes and dreams for the future. These hopes and dreams take on a life of their own and begin to grow inside you, along with the baby.

Yet, when you come to grief and are “torn apart,” there is no longer a living baby to go with your hopes and dreams. You have come to grief before you were prepared to mourn. The stillbirth of this precious child is an inexplicable loss of a new life – to parents, to siblings, to extended family and to friends.

Many Share Your Pain...

Over two million babies are stillborn each year, about one in 160 pregnancies. Each baby’s death is a tragedy. Most of the time, the baby dies before labour begins, but sometimes the baby dies during labour (about 15 per cent). These numbers represent many, many millions of people the world over who have been affected by stillbirth and whose grieving hearts are crying for expression and support.

...Yet Many Do Not Understand

Sadly, many people around you may not know what to say or do to support and comfort you. There are no cultural norms for mourning the loss of someone who never lived outside the womb and was never formally welcomed into the larger community of family and friends.

Well-meaning friends and even family members may make your experience even more difficult by things they say and do. Someone may imply that the loss isn’t tragic because “you can have another one.” Someone may say, “You didn’t really get to know the baby” or “Now you have an angel in heaven.” Of course, all you can think about is wanting your child in your loving arms.

Know that Numbness is Natural

During the first days and weeks after your baby’s death, you are likely to feel shock, emotional numbness and disbelief that any of this is real. These feelings are nature’s way of temporarily protecting you from the full reality of the death. Like anesthesia, they help you survive the pain of your early grief. Numbness is natural and necessary early in your grief process.

Acknowledge Your Loss

Acknowledging that your heart is broken is the beginning of your healing. As you experience the pain of your loss – gently opening, acknowledging and allowing the suffering – it will diminish it. In fact, the resistance to the pain can be more painful than the pain itself. As difficult as it is, you must, slowly and in doses over time, embrace the pain of your grief. As Helen Keller said, “The only way to the other side is through.”

Express Your Grief

Grief is the thoughts and feelings you have on the inside about the death of your baby. When you express those

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feelings outside of yourself, that is called mourning. Mourning is talking about the death, crying, writing in a journal, making art, participating in a support group, or any activity that moves your grief from the inside to the outside. Mourning is how you heal your grief.

Be Compassionate with Yourself

The word compassion literally means “with passion.” So, self-compassion means caring for oneself “with passion.” While we hope you have excellent outside support, this article is intended to help you be kind to yourself as you confront and eventually embrace your grief over the death of your baby.

Many of us are hard on ourselves when we are in mourning. We often have inappropriate expectations of how “well” we should be doing with our grief. We are told to “carry on” and “keep busy.” Actually, when we are in grief, we need to slow down, turn inward, embrace our feelings of loss, and seek and accept support.

Remembering Your Baby

To heal in grief, it is important to remember your baby and commemorate this precious being whose life ended much too soon. It is good for you to share or display photos of your baby, even photos after he or she died. It is good to talk about your son or daughter, both happy and sad memories of your pregnancy as well as the birth and death. It is good to cherish a blanket or item of clothing that touched your baby’s precious body before you had to say goodbye. It is good to use his or her name when you are talking to others.

Help Siblings Mourn

If you have other children, they are also experiencing the pain of this loss. After a stillbirth, grieving siblings are often “forgotten mourners.” This means parents, extended family, friends and society may overlook they have also lost someone they love.

Siblings may indirectly express their grief. They may show some regressive behaviours, like wanting to sleep with their mom and dad, clinging to their parents more often or asking to be taken care of in ways they were when they were younger. They may also display sadness, anger or anxiety through behaviours such as irritability, blame, distractibility, decreased motivation at school and disorganization.

Grieving siblings need adults to be open and honest with them about the death. They need to know it is OK to talk about the baby by name and about the baby’s death. They need to be reassured their grief is important too. They need their unique thoughts and feelings acknowledged by others.

Understand the Idea of Reconciliation

You will not “recover” from the stillbirth of your precious child. You are not ill. Your heart is broken and you are torn apart by this loss. You are not the same person today as you were before your baby died.

This does not mean you will live in misery, though. Remember, when mourning your grief, you not only heal, but you transform as you move through to the other side of your grief. Your life can potentially be deeper and more meaningful even after the death of your precious child.

When you have begun to reconcile your grief, the sharp pangs of sorrow soften, the constant painful memories subside. A renewed interest in the future begins to overtake the natural obsession with the past and the death. You experience more happy than sad in your days. You begin to set new goals and work toward them. You develop close relationships with others again, less fearful of losing them. You experience life fully again.

Believe in Your Capacity to Heal

In moments when you do not believe you will get through another day, cling to the belief that you will survive. Part of healing is believing there is a path to reconciliation and that you have the capacity within yourself to heal. Remember, the path to healing is finding ways that feel right for you to actively and openly mourn.

About the Author

Dr. Alan Wolfelt is a respected author and educator on the topic of healing in grief. He serves as director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and is on the faculty at the University of Colorado Medical School’s department of family medicine. Dr. Wolfelt has written many compassionate, bestselling books designed to help people mourn well so they can continue to love and live well, including *Understanding Your Grief*, *The Mourner’s Book of Hope*, and *Healing Your Grieving Heart After Stillbirth*, from which this article was excerpted. Visit www.centerforloss.com to learn more about the natural and necessary process of grief and mourning and to order Dr. Wolfelt’s books.