

Considerations for Helping Someone Cope with the death of a child through miscarriage, stillbirth, or other perinatal losses

It is only natural to mourn or grieve after the death of a child. The loss of a child surrounding pregnancy is one that brings about many feelings and emotions. There are many things that can be done to help someone who is grieving a pregnancy loss. The following are some suggestions for those close to the bereaved who may not know what to do or to say.

Suggestions for those Close to the Bereaved

1. Immediate opportunities to deal with loss -

A bereavement protocol adapted from (Kohn and Moffit, 2000) notes the opportunities that a bereaved parent should have:

- To contact partner or support person
- To touch or hold the baby, before or after death
- To be transferred from the maternity floor
- To receive pastoral care
- To name the baby
- To take a photograph of the baby to take home
- To receive a memory packet which may include: the hospital birth certificate, footprints, baby's blanket or hat, lock of hair, etc.
- To receive resources surrounding the grieving process, family coping, etc.
- To receive contact numbers to call in case medical questions arise, or if emotional support or referral is needed.
- To receive follow-up appointments for medical tests and genetic counseling or to review laboratory and autopsy reports.

2. Those close to the bereaved need to be good listeners: People need to talk about their loss. The more they talk, the more they process the reality of the death and come to grips with it.
3. Remember that there is no timetable for completing the grief process. People resent being told, "You should be over it by now." Moving towards acceptance of a loss can be a lengthy process. This is even true if the grieving person returns to work quickly. Each person should be allowed to experience grief in his or her own way.
4. Talk about the loss. Don't be afraid to bring up the subject for fear of making the family members feel worse. They are already feeling bad and thinking about their loss often. Your concern validates that their loss is also important to you and that their loved one will not be forgotten.
5. It is important to recognize that these losses are significant and should not be minimized by focusing on the possibility of future pregnancies and not talking about the loss.

6. Help the bereaved to deal with this loss in a way that is meaningful to them.
7. Some ways to honor this loss are to
 - Creating a memory book for the baby (Include an early sonogram picture, copy of other prenatal test results, footprints, a lock of hair, letters of condolence, list of baby shower gifts, dried flowers, Artwork by older siblings, a photograph of the mother while she was pregnant even if she wasn't showing yet, etc.)
 - *A shadow box could also be used to keep memories in.*
 - *It is sometimes possible to bury remains of the baby if lost to miscarriage. A grave marker with the name of the baby or just the baby's last name i.e. "Baby Smith" and date can be placed on the grave marker. A favorite verse or poem could be added. Work with your health care team to see if this is possible. Local Cemeteries will also be a resource for this.*
8. Inquire about the well-being of remaining family members. Some people - especially children - are often thought to be "okay" when, in fact, they are not. Your concern will be helpful.
9. Help the bereaved seek support for filling current "practical" needs. The individual might need help with shopping, meal preparation, phone calling, child care, or help with out-of-town guests.
10. Be honest with your own feelings. If you have trouble thinking of something to say, just know that your presence is of help.
11. Bereaved people will not have the energy to call you. Encourage those surrounding the bereaved to reach out and make contact by phone or by making a personal visit. Invite the bereaved family out for a meal. Check back from time to time to offer support.

Be sensitive to what is said to the person who is bereaved.

Things to Say:

- "I am so very sorry you have lost your baby.*
- "Things must be very difficult for you both ..."*
- "I don't know what to say to you ..."*
- "I can't imagine how you must be feeling"*
- Sometimes you don't have to say anything*

Things Not to Say:

- "It was probably for the best"*
- "Oh you weren't very far along in your pregnancy.*
- "Think of all you still have to be thankful for"*
- "You will forget about it in time"*
- "Try not to think about it."*
- "You will feel better once you get back to a normal routine."*
- "Pull yourself together"*
- "Surely you should be over it by now."*
- "You can always have another baby."*
- " You will feel better when you are pregnant again."*

The anniversary of the date of the loss is often a difficult time for individuals. Other dates may also be difficult. Other especially tough times may include: the due date, birthdays, wedding anniversaries, holidays or special days. On these dates or around the time, difficulty may be experienced when reflecting on the loss.

Some suggestions that may be helpful are to:

- Decide what can be handled comfortably and then let others know. - Let others know if the bereaved would like to talk about the loved one openly at gatherings.
- Make changes surrounding these events can make things less painful - don't be afraid to celebrate certain events in a different manner. Attend a different place of worship or at a different time. Let others take over special holiday tasks such as decorating the house, or making cookies, etc. Ask is this a task that can be shared by other family members? What can be given up this year to make things easier?
- Visit the grave site around the anniversary date.
- Write a tribute to the person who has died.
- Make a donation in the name of the one who had died.
- Plant a favorite perennial in the garden or yard, so as it comes up every year, the individual can be celebrated.

References

Miscarriage and Newborn Loss Support Program - Ann Arbor Lamaze Association,
Kohn and Moffitt, *A Silent Sorrow*, New York: Routledge, 2000