Grieving the Loss of Your Baby

A couple mourning the loss of a child is under a tremendous amount of stress. Financial concerns must be dealt with; the household must be kept running as smoothly as possible. The funeral and interment of your child must be planned. Family members and friends share condolences and need comforting from each of you. At times the presence of these well-meaning friends and family members can make it difficult for you to find moments of privacy to share your feelings with your partner.

In the midst of all these stressors, couples sometimes drift apart. The fluctuating nature of the grief process makes it almost impossible for the bereaved couple to be at the same stage of grief at the same time. One partner may be ready to move on with life and leave grief behind. The other partner may need a lot more time to move through the grief process. Remember, there is no “right” or “wrong” way to grieve.

You may also find that, as a couple, you become “out of sync” in your sexual relationship. While one partner may wish to receive physical and emotional comfort from sexual relations, the other may not be physically or emotionally ready for sexual expression. As many couples in this situation have found, it is very difficult to give support to someone when you need support yourself. You can see why misunderstandings, arguments, and hurt feelings can develop.

It is important for grieving couples to be patient and gentle with each other. Each person needs to listen to the other and to accept the other's grief process, even if these feelings are very different from what the other is feeling at the moment.

The Grief Journey

What you will be experiencing is commonly known as the Grief Journey. Grief is the emotion we feel at the loss of a loved one. The grief process that follows the death of a baby is similar to the emotions that follow other losses, but these feelings will usually be more intense and will last longer.

There is no standard timetable for grief. There is no orderly, step-by-step process that you can follow to “get over” your grief. You cannot perform a list of actions that will make your feelings disappear. Friends and family may want you to be back to your old self again, to put aside your feelings, to return to "normal". Know that this will happen when you are ready and allow yourself the time to heal.

Stages of the Grief Process

There are stages that every person experiences during the grieving process.
The first stage is Denial. Shock...Numbness...Denial...these are some of the emotions you may experience initially. It is normal to think, "This must be a mistake!" You may feel like you are watching your life from a distance, as if the event, this tragedy, is happening to someone else. This reaction serves as a buffer to help you get through the first weeks. It allows you the time to prepare yourself to face the reality of what has happened, and it helps make the process easier to face. The numbness will subside, and you will find yourself suddenly feeling again.

The second stage usually begins with feelings of anger, guilt, or resentment.

"It's not fair!" "I didn't deserve this!" Anger is a common feeling among those who have suffered the death of a baby. You may become angry with the doctors, the hospital, your partner, or God. You may think that friends and family members are not being supportive enough. Frequently, anger is turned inward, and you may experience guilt. You wonder if there was anything you could have done to prevent the death, or if something you did could have accidently contributed to the death. In addition to anger and guilt, you may feel resentment. Resentment is most often directed toward those who have healthy babies and happy families. These feelings of resentment and anger will shift.

The third stage finds you experiencing depression, often coupled with anxiety or despair.

These are difficult emotions, and they usually last longer than you or those around you would expect. Sometimes, people who grieve begin to feel worthless, unable to perform simple daily tasks, even find themselves unable to get out of bed. Life seems to lose its meaning. You may wish for life to end so you can join your deceased baby. You may become preoccupied with thoughts of the baby, have vivid dreams of your baby, and even hear your baby's cries at night. You may experience an overwhelming sense of dread—the feeling that something bad is going to happen. You may worry excessively about the safety of your loved ones.

It is understandable that your family and friends want you to be finished with the grieving process, to put aside your grief, and start to participate in life again. You must remember that others won't understand what you have experienced during the death of your baby. Do not feel obligated to hide your grief so that others around you feel comfortable. Know with time comes acceptance of the tragedy you have experienced.

How will I ever get through this?

The process of grieving can be long and difficult. It may seem that things will never get better for you. In time, you will begin to heal, and the intense grief of the early days of your loss will become less painful. Waves of grief gradually become less intense and less frequent, but the feelings of sadness and loss will likely always remain. You will just be able to handle the feelings better. You may cycle back through the steps again. This is normal.

While grieving, it is important for you to take good care of yourself. Research studies have shown that people who are grieving have a greater chance of becoming ill. Try to eat your meals at
normal times; limit fat and sugar in your foods. It is very important to maintain a healthy sleep schedule. Plan to go to bed and wake up at the same times every day. Get dressed in the morning; maintain a routine that gets you out of the house. Regular exercise is helpful, both for your body and your mind. Exercising doesn’t have to be complicated or expensive. A walk around the neighborhood several times a week can make a difference in how you feel. Keep your support system of friends and family close by.

You may also wish to attend a support group made up of people who, like you, have experienced the loss of a child. The Hospice and Palliative Care team is here to help you through the grief process. You are not alone.