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Author: Anderson, Linda

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Abstract

This paper looks at how people react to the news of a baby dying around its time of birth by a woman whose son was stillborn and who now leads a support group for other parents. She presents some of the statements and actions made by other people to families which tend to hurt rather than help. The paper concludes with advice on what will help, such as making no judgements.

Keyword: Families

How to help after the death of a child

By: Linda C. Anderson

"When I found out Jan and Ted were going to have their first baby, I was almost as happy for them as I had been at my own pregnancy. Jan is like a sister to me. We've worked together for years - sharing secrets, laughing and crying together."

Sylvia's hazel eyes clouded with tears as she ran her fingers along the rim of a coffee cup. "I gave Jan a baby shower. She was radiant. It was as if we were sponsoring her membership into a private club called 'Parents'. Then about a week after Jan went on maternity leave, Ted called me from the hospital. I'll never forget his voice, like an echo from the bottom of a cave. *He said 'Our baby died.'*"

I had no idea how to comfort him. My first impulse was to rush to the hospital, hold Jan in my arms, and cry right along with her. Yet, at the time, I dreaded facing her. I looked at my baby's healthy, chubby face. As I kissed his forehead, I kept asking, "Why did this happen? What can I do?"

Another club

As Sylvia discovered, there is another private club. Its members are not smiling parents, returning home with their precious infants. They are bereaved, suffering people, who leave the hospital with empty arms where a baby should have been.

This club is more exclusive and certainly not as cheerful. People don't ask to be members and they don't understand why they were chosen.

Approximately one in every three babies conceived each year does not reach its first birthday. In the United States 250,000 couples a year lose a child. Primary reasons are miscarriage and spontaneous abortion, stillbirth, death within the first six months due to unknown causes, and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).

In Australia one to two babies in every one hundred is either stillborn or dies within 28 days of birth.

Like Sylvia, you may know someone to whom this has happened — a family member, some friends down the street, that

nice couple at church who have been trying to have a baby for years.

I also have experienced the death of a child — a stillborn baby boy. Now fifteen years later, I lead a support group for other parents who have endured this agonising type of loss. There are common threads that run through their stories. They tell of well-meaning people who want to help but inadvertently say or do the wrong thing. Here are some statements and actions which tend to hurt, rather than help.

You should be happy you have another child at home

Love cannot be transferred so easily. Parents who have lost a child love that child.

They also love their other children, but it's not the same. One child doesn't replace another. In fact, in many instances parents may have mixed feelings of resentment and gratitude for the child who lived. They think, 'Why did you make it, and this baby didn't?'

Also the young child at home, who still has enormous needs, is difficult to cope with when the parent longs to be the child - to be cuddled and held and made to feel secure.

You probably shouldn't have . . . (guilt trip)

Parents of children who die or babies who don't make it to birth are wracked with guilt. They wonder if they ate too much or too little or the wrong things. They worry about whether or not they had enough or too much exercise. The list is endless.

The last thing they need is to have judgements, condemnation, or second-guessing about what should or should not have been done to prevent the tragedy. In many cases the cause of death is never determined. If the child was not planned,

parents carry a double guilt, wondering if their lack of enthusiasm or anger killed the baby. Parents can have these burdens of guilt and fear for the rest of their lives.

A corollary to this kind of statement is making critical remarks about the doctor or hospital involved. These only serve to increase guilt and anger.

You think that's bad — you should hear what happened to me!

If you sincerely want to make parents feel better about their loss, now is not the time for 'one-up-manship.'

Well-meaning friends also often do things that hurt rather than help. They rush to dismantle the nursery and hide all the baby clothes before the mother returns home from the hospital. They try to keep the mother from pain by excluding her from the funeral arrangements and memorial services. People refuse to talk about the loss, fearing to mention the baby's name or to discuss what happened.

It was God's will

Not many parents want to believe some vengeful, insensitive God took their baby away. Parents often find themselves at strong odds, maybe for the first time in their lives, with their religious beliefs. Although many turn to religion for solace, others feel angry with God for having allowed such pain.

The baby probably would have been deformed (i.e. a burden) anyway

Parents who truly wanted a baby feel they would have loved the child, regardless of birth defects or handicaps. It hurts just as much to lose an unhealthy baby.

You can always have another one

Again, parents in their grief-stricken state don't want another baby. They want *this* baby.

Try to forget it. The baby is an angel in heaven now

This statement makes parents feel no one takes the reality of their loss seriously. The baby was not an angel. It was flesh and blood. Many times only the parents saw it. In some cases (although as hospitals and medical personnel are becoming more enlightened, this doesn't happen as often) the mother wasn't allowed to see the baby.

There is a strong sense of unreality in the whole experience, as if it were a 'non-event'. It's simply not true that you can't love what you've never had. A child carried in the womb, loved in the heart, has become

a person to the mother and father. Now, it's as if the baby never existed.

These actions create shame and frustration. Parents often sense that they have disappointed their families and friends. They don't feel they can show the true extent of their grief, disappointment and rage.

Contrary to what friends may think, parents want to remember this child. They treasure photographs and mementoes. They yearn to caress baby clothes, sit in rocking chairs and gaze at the crib. They need desperately to talk, but most of all, to cry.

How to help

What can you do to help: Try these simple suggestions:

Listen to the parents.

Allow them to cry with you long after they 'should' be over it.

How long does grief last? For a lifetime. Parents who have lost children 50 years ago say they have never forgotten the experience. Of course, over time the pain lessens. A dull-aching throb beats a solemn drum when the parents see a healthy, newborn baby, or on every anniversary of the baby's death and the date the baby was due. If grief is not allowed to take its course, it can affect the parents for the rest of their

lives and cause them to retreat from happiness, to fear anticipating good fortune.

Go on simple errands for your friend at first and accompany her later. The whole universe is a potential 'button pusher' for a mother who has lost a child, especially if she has been wearing maternity clothes or has told others. The cashier at the supermarket, the drycleaner, a casual acquaintance may put one more gash in her deep wound at any moment. She feels like she's literally bleeding to death in public. She longs to become a recluse. She dreads facing the question, "What did you have — a boy or a girl?"

Make no judgements and consider no behaviour (except suicide) to be strange

Anything a parent does to release the tears and anger can only help, as long as it is not hurting anyone else.

Parents tell of bizarre reactions to the death of their children. Mothers feel physical pain in their arms and breasts. Fathers report going to work and shuffling papers from one stack to another for hours. The first stage of grief - numbness - can cause forgetfulness and inability to cope with simple everyday tasks. The rule of thumb is 'If it makes you feel better and it doesn't hurt anybody, do it.'

Understand that mothers and fathers don't grieve the same

The psychological term for this is 'incongruent grieving.' A mother may feel her husband doesn't care about the loss as much as she does. Often men, attempting to be protective of their wives, hold back their own pain. When this immense sadness is suppressed, it can emerge in inappropriate ways - bad temper, irresponsibility, loss of interest in living.

Also, the mother has had the opportunity to bond more solidly with the child and her grief may last much longer than the father's.

Don't forget to be a friend to other family members

The children in the family are hurting also. Very young children don't understand what has happened and fear their parents are rejecting them or that they will die too.

It's an old saying but so very true: "Little things mean a lot." In this case, the 'little thing,' the beloved infant or foetus, meant more to its mother and father than you can ever imagine. All that is left of the child they wanted so desperately is their memories and their love. The best thing you can do is meet your friends' needs in thoughtful, supportive ways. #

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The lake and the instant

Have you not seen
The dove-grey waters' undulating sheen
Whereon a bird can rest
Its rounded, slowly, slowly heaving breast,
Whilst all the blue-aired delicate mountains round
Attend, without a sound?
So, freed from fear, man's first primeval crime,
A heart might rest upon the lap of time.

Frances Cornford