



Offering support and understanding to bereaved parents of pregnancy and infant loss

Taking Care of Your Marriage After the Death of Your Baby

by Pat Schwiebert RN

One of the great fears that comes with having your baby die is the fear that your marriage may also die. At the time of their baby's death and for a short time after, many couples have reported that they felt closer and more in sync with each other than at any other time in their marriage. They describe this time as euphoric and almost surreal.

If you are a grieving parent you too may discover that, even in the face of the greatest tragedy you could possibly imagine, you feel closer to each other than ever before. This is a time of talking, sharing, crying, holding each other and supporting each other. The rest of the world and its problems are suddenly insignificant to you. Time stands still as the two of you focus only on this little one in front of you, savoring every essence of the experience of love and sorrow. You are surrounded and supported by family and friends, and most of your daily tasks are being taken care of by these caring people. It is the best and the worst of times all at once. Ironically this may be the last time in a long time that you, as a couple, will experience this degree of intimacy.

It is commonly believed that the death of a baby may well lead to the death of the marriage of the baby's parents. Well-meaning family and friends sometimes forewarn the bereaved couple to expect the worst. But how can something that the two of you created through your love destroy that loving relationship you share together?

Even though it is commonly stated as if it were fact, evidence does not support the assumption that your marriage is automatically doomed after your child dies. Research varies, claiming that anywhere from 20% to 70% of marriages dissolve after the loss of a child. A sobering piece for you to be aware of is that divorce among bereaved parents appears to be the highest after a perinatal death.

But even leaving divorce out as a threat, we know that marriages are significantly stressed after the death of a baby. That in itself is good reason to be aware of the potential difficulties.

You have been clinging to each other in the hospital, totally dependent on each other to get through each day. You are isolated from the rest of the world and temporarily protected from the ignorant and hurtful comments of other people. The protective bubble around you springs a leak as you begin to take on the tasks of daily living. Decisions need to be made. Household problems need to be attended to. Your mind gets distracted by these needs. This is not a bad thing. But it is real. You

sadly learn that you are not going to retain that intense intimacy that you now covet.

You, the father, take on a project, keeping yourself busy so that you don't have to get too close to your feelings. You, the mother, go to bed and pull the covers over your head trying in vain to hide from the truth that is becoming so suddenly apparent, that this was not a bad dream, that this really did happen. Your baby really has died. And your feelings are right on the surface, spilling out and making a mess of a once ordered life.

And then one of you, usually the father, returns to work. There is some relief waiting for you as you re-enter the real world where the death of your baby is not the only thing on the menu. You start to be grateful for a bit of relief from the constant grief at home.

But if you are the wife who stays home you may resent the fact that your husband is getting on with his life. He seems to be able to cope with the everyday stresses of life better than you. You wish the two of you could be close again. He seems to wish only that life at home could be a little easier. He can't fix you. You can't make him grieve the way you are grieving. So things tend to get worse before they can begin to get better.

There are several reasons why perinatal bereavement can be hard on a marriage:

Because couples of child-bearing age are younger, they are less likely to have experienced a major loss in their lives and therefore are not familiar with grief. And they may not have experienced a previous major stress in their married life together, so they may not know how the other will respond to that stress. It can be very scary to see your partner feeling such deep anger, sadness, or desolation, as this person you thought you knew seems to change before your eyes.

Other people may view grief that results from the death of a wished for baby as abnormal or unnecessary since others cannot always understand the bond that already existed between parent and child. The grief parents experience goes unsupported, unrecognized, and barely tolerated. Others may tend to discount loss at this stage, believing that the couple can simply have another child. Or they may suppose that grief will be minimal and temporary because the parents spent little or no time with the baby. Parents on the other hand may fear they will never be able to bear future children. Lack of outside support prevents the parents from

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What is Brief Encounters?

Brief Encounters is a non-profit, non-sectarian support group for parents whose babies have died before, during, or after birth. At informal, mutually supportive meetings and through our monthly newsletter and Web site, bereaved parents and their families share their stories, discuss issues that arise from pregnancy and infant loss, and remember their children. Through reading, talking and listening, we learn what grief is—and how, through understanding and caring, we heal.

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reaching out for help for fear others will make light of their plight. Assumptions and judgments regarding the couple's appropriate grieving styles are very unhelpful and all too common.

Perinatal grief generally impacts the mother more than the father. This does not mean he doesn't care but only that his grief takes on a different shape. The unborn baby was completely helpless, relying on his parents, especially the mother to sustain it until birth. The mother may have to deal with anger she has with her own body for betraying their baby and a sense that she has let her husband down by denying him the privilege of parenting.

You're in this together, but you're also in it alone. Both of you created this baby. You are both grieving the same loss. But you can't do each other's grieving. You must do your own grief work. And you will each grieve in a different way. That doesn't mean that one person is doing it wrong. But it won't look the same. We would all like our spouse to think the same way we think, feel the same way we feel, grieve the same way we grieve. It would be so much easier that way. But that's not the way it is. Darn it.

Grieving takes all the energy you have. Grief work is physically, emotionally and spiritually exhausting. You very well may not have the energy to care for anyone else. You know your marriage is in trouble. You know you can't seem to tell your partner what you need, because you don't even know yourself. And you can't do anything about it because your own survival is all you can deal with. Some people think that they want a divorce because they know that they can't give their partner what they deserve, because they have nothing to give. Feeling empty, they neglect each other, seeming only capable of attending to their own needs. Putting it simply, at this stage in your grief you are likely to be emotionally unavailable to your partner.

At a time when couples need each other the most the not-so-pretty picture of grief makes it nearly impossible to journey together. Isolation, withdrawal, loneliness and tension are not how you want to be seen, nor are they something you want to be around. And grief certainly does not make for good bed partners. Sexual needs often differ greatly between the two of you. For example, she just wants to be held; he is eager for sex. She wants another baby; he's not so sure that's a good idea right now. And the thought of enjoying **anything** right now may seem like a betrayal to your dead baby.

And if it's not hard enough just between the two of you, there are additional problems awaiting you. You didn't just marry your partner. You also got their family as part of the package, for better or for worse. Parents, in their desire for you to be happy, may want to fix you and try to move through grief faster than you can handle. They can't bear seeing you hurt, so they may unknowingly put added stress on you as a couple to perform in ways that than you are incapable of. Their well-meaning advice can put a dagger in your heart and a wedge in your relationship with them and with each other. Loyalties and choosing sides can be very unhelpful.

You cannot expect more of a marriage than it was able to offer you prior to your baby's death. An already frail marriage will have a hard time withstanding the pressure brought about by the death of your baby. Look back and assess where your marriage was before your baby died. How were your communication skills before? Did you rely on each other? Did you talk about hard stuff? Were you able to allow each other to have different opinions about something that was important to you? Were you

tolerant of each other's individual coping styles? How have you dealt with stress in the past? How does your partner deal with stress? Is this marriage worth saving?

Some pitfalls in communication that can make things worse between the two of you are: (a) mind reading, (b) trying to change the other's mind, (c) telling the other how he/she should feel, (d) "hitting below the belt", i.e. aiming for your partners places of vulnerability, (e) storing up resentments, and (f) digging up things from the past.

You already lost enough when your baby died. You don't want to lose anything more. The strength you needed to survive what you thought you could not endure is still within you.

But it will be up to you to do the necessary work, both alone and together, to rebuild your marriage after this tragic loss. You may need to increase your communication skills so you can hear each other better. If talking is too stressful you may want to share how you are feeling in writing. Learn how to forgive yourself and how to forgive your partner. Trust each other's processes. Assume the best about each other. And even though it's work you have to do, you don't have to do it alone. Don't be afraid to ask for help. Find out with whom you can feel "safe" to talk. Sit at your own feet and let your life be your teacher.

You are going to learn a whole lot about yourself and a whole lot about your partner as you journey through grief. See this opportunity for

Other Recommended Reading

Here are some other articles on marriage and loss that you might find of interest. You might also wish to check out the newsletter archive on the Brief Encounters Web site at briefencounters.org for past issues on this topic.

* Marriage Survival After Losing a Baby, by Carol Ruth Blackman
thelaboroflove.com/forum/loss/bereavedmoms.html

* Growing a Strong Marriage After The Loss of a Child, by Margaret Brownley
griefandrenewal.com/article22.htm (also in our January 2005 issue)

* The Unthinkable Grief: Marriages Can Survive the Loss of a Child, by Sheri & Bob Stritof
marriage.about.com/cs/parenting/a/unthinkgrief.htm?terms=child+loss (also in our January 2005 issue)

Westside Loss Group: New Location

The Westside Brief Encounters group will be meeting on Monday, March 15, at Fire Station #60, 8585 NW Johnson St, Beaverton. Phone: (503) 203-8033. Please e-mail Caroline (cfalcone@mail.com) or Talya (talyamcnassar@gmail.com) if you have any questions. Check next month's newsletter to confirm the location, as we are still trying this one out. We look forward to seeing you in group. The group has been attended by newly bereaved parents as well as parents who are years into their grief journey. It is usually an intimate group with parents asking questions of one another, acknowledging where they are today and feeling validated. If you attend the Brief Encounters group at the Peace House and are looking for more connection between meetings, please join us. We would love to provide more support for you.

Talya (*Rebecca 2007*) and Caroline (*Cyrus 2007*)

Resources

Movies That Bereaved Parents May Choose to Avoid

We have compiled a list of movies that bereaved parents and families may choose to avoid due to potentially upsetting subject matter relating to pregnancy loss or the death of a child. If you have additions to this list, please send them to the editor at brief_encounters_news@yahoo.com.

1408 (2007)	Joy Luck Club, The (1993)
Accidental Tourist, The (1988)	Jude (1996)
Agnes of God (1985)	Junebug (2005)
AI: Artificial Intelligence (2001)	Juno (2007)
Alien 3 (1992)	Kingdom of Heaven (2005)
Alien 4 (1997)	Knocked Up (2007)
Almost Romeo (2005)	March of the Penguins (2005)
Astro Boy (2009)	Matador, The (2006)
Astronaut's Wife, The (1999)	Message in a Bottle (1999)
Baby Mama (2008)	Moonlight Mile (2002)
Beloved (1998)	Music Within (2007)
Blood Diamond (2006)	My Girl (1991)
Bridge to Terabithia (2007)	Mystic River (2003)
Butterfly Effect, The (2004)	Pan's Labyrinth (2006)
Candy (2006)	Paradise (1991)
Children of Men (2006)	Pay it Forward (2000)
Cider House Rules, The (1999)	Perfume: The Story of a Murderer (2006)
City Hall (1996)	Quigley Down Under (1990)
Constant Gardener, The (2005)	Ray (2004)
Crash (2005)	Reservation Road (2007)
Cry in the Dark, A (1988)	Saving Private Ryan (1998)
Dark, The (2005)	Sex and Lucia (2002)
Deep End of the Ocean (1999)	She's Having a Baby (1988)
Devil's Advocate, The (1997)	Sixth Sense, The (1999)
Door in the Floor, The (2004)	Sleepy Hollow (1999)
Eastern Promises (2007)	Slingblade (1996)
Elizabeth (1998)	Smilla's Sense of Snow (1997)
Frida (2002)	Sophie's Choice (1982)
Godsend (2004)	Sweet Hereafter, The (1997)
Gone Baby Gone (2007)	Syriana (2005)
Hand That Rocks the Cradle (1992)	Tess (1980)
High Fidelity (2000)	Then She Found Me (2008)
Hours, The (2002)	Up (2009)
I. Robot (2004)	Walk the Line (2005)
Immediate Family (1989)	Whale Rider (2003)
Immortal Beloved (1994)	What Dreams May Come (1998)
In the Bedroom (2001)	Waitress (2007)
Ironweed (1987)	World According to Garp, The (1982)

Books That Bereaved Parents May Choose to Avoid

Our movie list has been well-received and we hope it is useful to you. We'd like to start a list of books that may include content and/or storylines that bereaved parents may find disturbing. Please send book titles along with author and year of publication to the editor at: brief_encounters_news@yahoo.com.

Books on Marriage After Loss

The following books are available from The Centering Corporation (centering.org). The Centering Corporation is a non-profit organization dedicated to providing education on grief and loss for professionals and the families they serve.

Help Your Marriage Survive, by Paul C. Rosenblatt. Contains practical information about the problems that grieving parents face. Offers suggestions and at the same time talks about honoring each other during the grieving process.

Tunnel of Light, by Richard Dew. When his only child is killed by a drunk driver, Dr. Dave DeMarco's well-ordered world unravels. Overwhelmed by grief, he alienates himself from his wife, his friends, and even from God. In the midst of this he makes a critical error in diagnosis. His attempts to save his marriage, regain his faith and find meaning in a world in which he sees no future are complicated by his determination to atone for his medical blunder even though this effort may cost him his medical practice, his wife and possibly his life.

For Better or Worse, by Maribeth Wilder Doerr. For strengthening marriages after a child dies. Looks at gender grief, building your relationship after your child dies, how to help each other heal; includes a grief chat. "While it's important to respect your spouse's needs, it's also wise to respect your own. You must take care of yourself both physically and emotionally before you can begin to help your partner or your children."

Why Mine? by Joy and Dr. S.M. Johnson with Billy Williams. For parents whose child is seriously ill. This simple and supportive booklet covers other children, your marriage, anger, hope, depression, single parents, and community people. "When your child is ill you come to know a lot about fear. Fear of the unknown. What will happen? Fear of treatment. What will they do? Fear of tests."

Counselor Referrals

Not all counselors are familiar with the issues that parents face after the death of their baby. If you feel like you would like to talk with a counselor, listed below are the names of persons BriefEncounters highly recommends:

- * Jillian Romm RN, LCSW, (503) 226-6002
- * Brynna Sibilla, LCSW, (503) 289-1101
- * Gaby Donnell LCSW, (503) 287-5683
- * Britta Dinsmore, LCSW, (503) 913-4791
- * Jennifer Stock, (503) 242-1558
- * Audrianna J. Gurr, MS, NCC, (503) 475-4005
- * The Dougy Center (for siblings), (503) 775-5683

Support Between Meetings

Do you need to talk but don't want to wait until the next group meeting? Here are some friends who are willing to talk—or just listen. You may be looking to connect with someone who has experienced similar circumstances in his or her loss(es.) These volunteers welcome your contact by phone or e-mail. Please put "Brief Encounters" in the message line of your e-mail so that our volunteers will be sure to read your message. If you are interested in being listed as a support person, or wish to have your name removed, please contact the editor.

Nancy (bump7911@comcast.net or 503-666-1998) had a miscarriage at 11.5 weeks (8/99) and delivered a full term son, Nicolas (9/13/00), who died 2 months and 8 days later (11/21/00). Nicolas had severe brain damage due to complications during labor. Nancy and Don have one living son, Alex (1994).

Dominique (503-281-6970 or ddallmayr@yahoo.com) adopted a son after a full term stillbirth.

Karin (kersgrim@msn.com) lost her son, stillborn at full term without explanation (9/94), experienced two miscarriages, and a pregnancy interruption of a son, at 23 weeks, who had Trisomy 18. Karen has two living children.

Shannon (adamshannon75@comcast.net) lost her daughter, Heather Renee, stillborn due to an intrauterine infection and premature birth. She has experienced a successful subsequent pregnancy.

Rachel (503-287-2628) has had 3 early miscarriages and lost twins at 21.5 weeks due to premature labor in January 2004. She has 2 living children.

Elizabeth (503-648-1458 or odekirk_hash@yahoo.com) lost a child at 6.5 months gestation after trying to conceive for 7 years and using IVF. She has since adopted a girl.

Gayle (503-661-0764) had a son who was stillborn after a ruptured cord during labor at 34 weeks, lost a son at 17 weeks, and experienced four early pregnancy losses. She has two living children, a son ('96) and a daughter ('01).

Ken (503-761-3816, 503-516-2761 cell) had a son, Mitchell, who died from heart failure ('00). He has two living sons, Mason and Marshall.

Terri (ststrauss@comcast.net) lost her son, stillborn without explanation at 36 weeks. She has three living children (Delanie 3/99 and Genna & Cara 5/02).

Sarah (scellwood@yahoo.com) lost her daughter, Audrey, stillborn at 38.5 weeks in January 2008 due to an umbilical cord incident. She has one living daughter.

Joanie (miniquilter79@hotmail.com) had a daughter, Melissa Catherine, who died of SIDS at 6 weeks of age. She has 3 living children.

Maura (cioeta@comcast.net) lost her son, stillborn at full term without explanation (6/96). She has two healthy children (Anthony, 1/98) and (Annamarie, 4/01). Due to serious high blood pressure at the end of her last pregnancy, which caused a stressful delivery, she plans to have no more children.

Charlotte (503-513-5448) had a son who died at one month of a heart defect. She has also experienced four early pregnancy losses, infertility issues, and a successful subsequent pregnancy.

Carol (carolyork@verizon.net) experienced a miscarriage (7/96) and the loss of a son, stillborn due to a cord accident (3/00). She has two living children (9/97 and 6/01).

Shannon (djzela@yahoo.com) lost her daughter, Dorothy Raine (6/1/07), full term (39 weeks) during labor due to an umbilical cord incident. She and her husband have a son, born 11/08.

Brief Encounters Meetings

Our support group meetings are a safe place to talk about your child, your loss and your grief. You are welcome to share, or just listen. A facilitator guides the meeting. For more information or directions, please call (503) 699-8006.

Parents of Infant Loss and Pregnancy Loss, Including Early Pregnancy Loss

We ask that children not attend these meetings. Thank you.

Meets the second Monday of each month, 7:00 pm

Portland: Peace House, 2116 NE 18th Ave.

New Westside Meeting!

Meets the third Monday of each month, 7:00 pm

Location for March meeting: Beaverton Fire Station #60

Parents of Pregnancy Interruption Due to Medical Reasons

We ask that children not attend these meetings. Thank you.

Meets the fourth Thursday of each month, 7:00 pm

Portland: Peace House, 2116 NE 18th Ave.

Parents of Subsequent Pregnancies and Adoptions & Parents Trying to Conceive

Meets the fourth Monday of each month, 7:00 pm

Portland: Peace House, 2116 NE 18th Ave.

Fertility & Adoption Support Group

We ask that children not attend these meetings. Thank you.

This group is exclusively for women who are trying to conceive their first, second or more child. Women who have not experienced a loss are also welcome. This group offers a friendly and relaxed atmosphere where you can have a sense of not being alone and receive encouragement, have a chance to express what the experience is like, share what we have learned about fertility and ourselves, and receive positive support. RSVP to Anne at (503) 570-3498 or annehend@aol.com, or Carol at (503) 280-0238 or carol@riverhealing.com.

Meets the first Tuesday of each month, 7:00 pm

Portland: Peace House, 2116 NE 18th Ave.

Brief Encounters

Metanoia Peace Community

United Methodist Church

2116 NE 18th Ave.

Portland, OR 97212

Message Line: Support, Questions

(503) 699-8006 (Spanish line: 503-419-6299)

Web site

briefencounters.org

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