

Tips for Supporting Members Through Pregnancy, Infant, and Child Loss

Supporting Community Members When the Worst Happens

1 First and foremost, unless you've experienced the death of your baby or child, you simply can't fully understand the indescribable devastation of this loss. Please don't pretend that you can – those seeking your counsel will see right through that and you will lose their trust.

The loss of baby during pregnancy or infancy and the loss of a child later in life are equally painful losses. The primary difference is that the loss of a baby during pregnancy or an infant immediately after birth, generally leads to denial of mother/fatherhood and lack of acknowledge of the depth of the loss.

The Primary Difference:

Child Loss: When children live for all or part of childhood, people have memories of them. They are more likely to understand the parent's long-term grief and pain and therefore offer continued support.

Baby/Infant Loss: When babies or infants die early, people don't have their own memories of them. Often folks struggle to understand why these parents are still grieving or struggling after a few weeks or months or years. Support often vanishes within weeks or months. They are more frequently told to "move on" and "stop being so dramatic" and "get over themselves."

One of the most painful questions you may ask will probably be asked early on in your relationship with a new member: "Do you have kids?" or "How many kids do you have?" This can create a painful internal debate for many, many parents.

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- Do I say yes and explain?
- Do I say no and deal with the guilt of denying my baby?
- Do I have the energy to go through my story again?
- What is her/his reaction going to be – I can't deal with awkward, uncomfortable silence or crappy cliques today.
- I never know how to answer this.
- I hate this question

Always refer to their baby as a baby or by the name they have given it rather than saying “pregnancy loss” or “miscarriage” or “stillbirth.”

However early in pregnancy the baby may have died, it is still their baby – not just an event. In fact, use the baby/child’s name as much as possible. The number one thing I hear from parents is how much they love to hear people say their name.

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Questioning of faith and spirituality is common after the death of a baby or child. It’s important that they feel they can openly talk about their questions and doubts as well as anger or rejection of God/Higher Power during their grief process. Questioning or having doubts does not mean they have abandoned their faith and this process should be treated with understanding and open discussion.

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Cliches such as “God has a plan,” “Your baby is with God now,” “Your baby is in a better place,” “God needed an angel,” and similar phrases are NOT helpful. Please refrain from using these phrases. Encouragement to “find the gift or blessing” in the loss is also discouraged during the early stages of the grieving process. Such statements and cliches can push members away and increase feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Recognizing and honoring the life of their baby can be invaluable to the family’s healing. Suggesting and/or being open to having a celebration of life or memorial service for their baby, regardless of how early the loss occurred, is a good way to validate and acknowledge their loss, as well as a way to honor their grief process.

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Don’t assume they can or will have more children.

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The truth is they may not be able to have more children either physically or they may not be able to handling the emotional consequences of additional pregnancies and possible losses.

In addition, another child won’t replace the one who died. Too often, it’s assumed that in order to heal, one just needs to have a “rainbow baby.” (Rainbow baby is a common term for babies born after the death of a previous baby.) The truth is another baby can’t replace the one who died.

For those who have lost their only child(ren) and can't have more, their grief is especially complex and multi-layered. It's not just about the death of their child, it's also:

- The loss of an identity and an uncertainty about what their life now means
- The fear of not knowing how to create a happy, fulfilling life without children
- The lack of acknowledgement by the world that they are a mother or father because you can't see their child.
- Having to learn how to love and parent a child who isn't here physically.
- The loss of not just their baby, but the toddlerhood, childhood, adulthood and all the experiences of the life that would have been for their baby

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Good things to acknowledge to them/give them permission for:

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- They are a mother or father and always will be. They have a right to claim that role and identity.
- If they haven't already, they are allowed to name and acknowledge their baby regardless of how early in pregnancy the baby may have died
- There is no "right" way to grieve
- It's ok to say no to things such as baby showers, children's birthday parties, holiday celebrations, etc.
- It's ok to set boundaries or let go of people who cannot or will not support them as they need in their grief process