

# When a Baby Dies...

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Pregnancy is usually a happy time. Many things change when you are told your baby has died, either through miscarriage, stillbirth, or a newborn's death. While preparing for birth...you are suddenly faced with death. A time of planning and hoping may change to a time of confusion and sorrow.

Each family member grieves differently, at their own pace. There are different stages of grief. These stages can come in any order and length and do not always occur in sequence. You may skip some and repeat others many times. Grief is lifelong and will have peaks and valleys of emotions.

If your grief, depression, or stress from your job and relationships have not begun to lessen after six to 12 months, you may need to see a counselor for help with working through the process.

## **Stages of Grief:**

### ***A. Shock & Denial:***

- Failure to accept reality
- Disbelief
- Short attention span or difficulty concentrating
- Time confusion

These feelings can last for a few hours or a few weeks. You are seldom fully prepared for death and may experience a sense that this cannot be happening to you. You may also act as if nothing is wrong or pretend you were never pregnant in the first place.

### ***B. Depression & Sadness*** (This stage often follows shock and denial.)

You may experience any of the following feelings that may last for weeks or months:

- Emotional numbness
- Social withdrawal and a sense of emptiness and isolation
- Disorganization
- Feeling like a failure
- Physical symptoms: body distress (lump in throat, loss of appetite, exhaustion, sleeping problems, sighing).
- Siblings may begin to act out, striving for attention you are no longer giving

### ***C. Anger***

You may feel like saying:

- "Why has this happened to me?"
- "How could God have done this to me?"
- "I did all the right things, but it didn't matter."
- "This all came from your side of the family."

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*This information has been reviewed and recommended for use by the UAMS/CPED/Patient Education Advisory Committee.*

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You may become overly protective of surviving children, often smothering them emotionally. Your marriage or relationship may begin to suffer from lack of communication with each other.

Anger may be directed towards those closest to you (your spouse, family, friends) or those seen as having power and control (doctor and God). You may question your own belief in God or you may openly turn to religion for comfort and healing. Anger is not a bad emotion, however try not to let it build up inside your system. Avoid letting it out in a negative way. When anger is directed inward, it becomes depression.

### ***D. Guilt:***

- “It must have been something I did.”
- In trying to find the answer, you may blame yourself.
- Guilt feelings may be overwhelming, and parents may go over every detail of pregnancy to find the real or imagined causes for the tragedy.

You must break the cycle of guilt in order to heal. Guilt can destroy self-esteem, relationships, motivation and, for some, the will to live. To break the cycle, you may need to see a grief counselor or a church minister.

### ***E. Reconciliation, Relief, and Acceptance***

You may experience one or more of the following:

- Sense of release
- Renewed energy
- Eating and sleeping habits re-established
- Able to make decisions
- Able to laugh and smile again
- Strengthening of marriage and relationships
- Improvement in parenting skills.

The loss is no longer felt to be the major influence over your life now. The baby’s death becomes accepted, not in the sense of being right or fair, but only that it happened. For many families, the healing process takes from one to two years, for some, a lifetime.

### **Other Children:**

To help surviving children cope, allow them to write a letter or draw a picture for the baby. Place the letter or drawing in the casket or keep it with other baby reminders. Reassure them that there was nothing they did to cause the baby’s death. Be aware of their needs. Recognize, understand and share their pain. They are sometimes unable to find the words to express their own loss and fear about death. These siblings may begin to:

- act out their feelings (anger, argumentative, nightmares, bed wetting, difficulty separating from you, crying or whining, stuttering, sudden outburst of fear or hatred, possible suicide attempts, etc.)
- retreat into a silent world of dark thoughts. Children may need a counselor’s help if their grief reactions seem extreme or prolonged.

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## What Parents Can Do:

- Create a special “memory box” containing such things as the hospital mementos, sympathy cards, special gifts, personal notes or a diary of your feelings about your baby and this experience.
- Plant flowers or a tree in honor of the baby.
- Make a list of loving things that come your way.
- Wear a charm.
- Have the baby’s birthstone set in a ring.
- Have the baby’s name written in a special place.
- Buy a special Christmas tree ornament in memory of your loved one.
- Plan a special service if there is no burial.
- Find a support group for parents of deceased children.



## Support Groups and Newsletters:

### *Bereaved Parent of the USA*

Central Arkansas Chapter  
Contact: (501) 944-9007  
bpusathecentralarkansaschapter.org

### *Good Mourning Grief Support Groups for Children and Parents*

Contact: (501) 364-7000  
www.goodmourningcenter.org

### *Journey*

Contact: (501) 552-6499

### *The Recovery Room*

Contact: 1-866-273-3835

### *SHARE*

Contact: (501) 202-1777 or  
1-800-445-7760 (Statewide)  
www.nationalshareoffice.com

*My Baby Died Today*  
By Ann McElmurry

*My baby died today  
And the flowers bloomed  
And the birds sang  
And the night still followed the day  
It seems so strange*

*Nothing changed in any way  
You see, my baby died  
And part of my life  
Part of my world  
Just quietly slipped away*

Adapted from: *The Arkansas Department of Health*  
*Division of Perinatal Health*

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