

How you can help parents bereaved by stillbirth/early loss

Written by parents for parents

We've spoken with some parents whose son or daughter died before, during or shortly after birth. We listened as they told us about some of the particularly unique characteristics of this type of loss, what does and doesn't help. Here's what they would love you to know.

The grief following baby loss can be very challenging. The mother's body has had the same experience as someone with a surviving baby, so she may well struggle with issues such as milk coming in, having a post-baby body, or postnatal depression. The father experiences no such physical changes but at the same time is both grieving his child and trying to care for his partner.

Many hospitals make good provision for the parents, allowing them to spend time with their baby. In some cases they may take an imprint of the baby's hands or feet, as well as photographs. Apart from their memories of the pregnancy and labour, and the items that they have bought or been given, these are often the only tangible mementoes of the baby that the parents are able to retain.

While some parents may, in the future, go on to have another baby or choose to adopt, they are painfully aware that he or she can never be a replacement for the person that died, as every child is unique. Others may be unable to, or choose not to, follow this path.

✓ DO

✓ **Do** let me talk about my child. Even if you never got to meet them or have any memories of them, they are still my child.

✓ **Do** just be there. You don't have to say anything or give me advice.

✓ **Do** find a way to acknowledge my baby's existence and say their name – we find that a real comfort.

✓ **Do** reach out to me – the sense of isolation can be intense.

✓ **Do** invite me to join you for a walk or a coffee – getting out with a friend may be a good thing for me to do.

✗ DON'T

✗ **Don't** avoid me; it can feel that you are denying their existence.

✗ **Don't** clam up and change the subject when my child's name is mentioned – I need to talk about them.

✗ **Don't** say things like 'it was for the best' if there were serious health issues or we knew that their life would be limited – we loved them.

✗ **Don't** assume that I am OK, just because I appear to be coping.

✗ **Don't** feel that you have to have the answers for my questions – just be there for me.

✓ DO

- ✓ **Do** understand that I may be struggling with all sorts of thoughts. When you spend time with me, I may need to talk, be quiet or just cry. Please be patient with me.
- ✓ **Do** call or text just to find out how we are doing and let us know you are thinking of us.
- ✓ **Do** understand that it will take time to deal with the baby things around the house.
- ✓ **Do** show you care by providing meals for us (in disposable containers) or helping with the housework or shopping.
- ✓ **Do** sit with me in the sadness or anger I feel and be a safe place where I can express my feelings – it helps the grieving process.
- ✓ **Do** feel able to give me special keepsakes which include our baby's name or initials – these acknowledge their existence.
- ✓ **Do** ask (later on) if we have a memorial or special place, and please remember anniversaries and key dates.
- ✓ **Do** allow me to talk about the pregnancy, labour and birth when I'm ready. And please be willing to look at photos of my child.

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✗ DON'T

- ✗ **Don't** feel like you have to tread on eggshells – grief is part of the process.
- ✗ **Don't** be offended if your invitations are turned down.
- ✗ **Don't** suggest that getting rid of the baby things or putting them away as soon as possible will somehow make the situation different.
- ✗ **Don't** try to minimise what has happened or find a silver lining.
- ✗ **Don't** feel you have to point out someone else who has had a similar experience. Each situation is different.
- ✗ **Don't** say things like 'You can always try for another baby' – each child is unique, and that may not be an option for us anyway.
- ✗ **Don't** ignore the fact that our baby was born. Say their name and acknowledge them as time goes on.
- ✗ **Don't** forget about Dad – he is grieving too. We both had hopes and dreams for our child.
- ✗ **Don't** stop supporting us after a few days or weeks – we need your love and support to continue.

