




Sands

fathers
grieve too

 The birth of a baby is normally seen as a happy event, not a tragic one. The death of your precious baby will probably be the most difficult and painful thing you will ever experience. Nothing and no one could ever prepare you for the devastation that follows this experience. The expectation of some family members, friends and a large proportion of society can often dictate the way you live with this loss and what you do with your grief.

This leaflet has been prepared by Sands parents to help you through some of the difficult times ahead.

Miscarriage

The common misconception of miscarriage is that because the loss occurred early in pregnancy, it was not a catastrophe. With this attitude, society has said that you have no right to grieve, or if you do grieve, it will be minimal.

Nothing could be further from the truth. No matter how far into the pregnancy, you may already have hopes and dreams for your future with this baby.

Stillbirth

A stillbirth is considered by most of society to be more serious and a short period of grieving is generally accepted – but not too long. You may be told ‘... you never really got to know your baby’. This kind of comment can be very hurtful. It may seem unfair that people don’t recognise the significance of your loss.



Newborn and infant death

Newborn or early infant death is often given much greater attention. This is usually because family, whānau, friends and others in your community have met your baby and recognise that this baby is an important family member. They may encourage you to grieve for a period of time. However, you may soon get the feeling from them that it is time to ‘get a hold of yourself and get on with life’. You may receive subtle hints that you have had long enough to grieve.

Grief is a process that is better dealt with than ignored. No matter what people say, there is no way that you can speed up the grief process. It is better to ignore the comments and keep working through your grief.



Feelings

Most of the time, fathers are neglected grievers. Though society has become more aware of grief, people still aren’t sure how to respond to a man’s feelings. It’s often safer for people to ask how your wife/partner is doing than to ask how you feel.

You may have times of real panic and worry about your family. You may have lost confidence and feel out of control. You may spend a lot of time asking yourself, ‘Why? What could I have done?’

This will be one of the toughest times in your life, and it’s important to take care of yourself and the hurt you’re feeling. You may find people expect you to be strong and take control. You may feel that you are making all the arrangements and doing all the work. You may feel like you’re taking care of everyone but you. After the funeral/burial, people are likely to

expect you to be 'strong' and 'get on with things'. People expect that you will soon 'get over' your loss. Actually, you will never 'get over' your loss. It will become a part of your life, as will the memories surrounding the loss of your baby.

The grief process is part of experiencing a loss. Because your baby has died, you will grieve. It's as if you have no choice ... you grieve.

The only choice is *how* you grieve and what to do with your grief.

It is unfair and unjust that your baby has died. It's okay to feel angry and devastated about this. Anger is an emotion that everyone has. Anger is a normal part of grieving for your baby. You may feel angry with your doctor or some other health professional, or angry with yourself or wife/partner. You may feel angry with your baby, you may feel angry with God, you may not be able to say specifically why you feel angry. Sometimes anger may be directed at your wife/partner and other children simply because they're around. Sometimes anger is vented in a violent way. If you have got to the point where you are feeling that you may become violent – get help! Often it is difficult to assess how serious your own anger problem is. Perhaps see your GP or make contact with an organisation that can help.

You may also feel very flat and have no motivation. These are also expressions of grief and are normal for many people. If those bleak and flat feelings continue and you feel as though there is nothing to look forward to in your life and no chance of anything getting better – it may be helpful to talk with someone who is experienced in supporting people in grief. There is a clear distinction between grief

and depression, but a professional is better qualified to support you in making this distinction.

Regaining normality

As you begin trying to regain some kind of normality, you may find your emotions popping up when you least expect them. Things that would not normally affect you can often trigger your emotions:

- something you have read
- something you have seen on TV
- something that someone else has said
- sometimes being back in the same hospital or where your baby was born.

Anniversaries are often very difficult. You may notice you and/or your partner becoming quite agitated or moody in the weeks leading up to important anniversaries.

You and your wife/partner

You may be scared about what's happening to each of you and to your relationship and not know what to do about it. You may both be so wiped out with your grief that you can't support each other. Give yourselves time – hold and comfort each other. It is important to respect each other's way of grieving. For some, it can help to talk about your emotions and to share your feelings, fears and memories. If you don't talk about your loss, your wife/partner may think that your baby didn't mean as much to you and that you don't care. It is quite normal for her to feel this way. However, if talking does not feel like the right way to express your emotions or grief, it is helpful to let her know that. It may be that you express your grief

through doing things, rather than talking about them. Most of the time your wife/partner just needs to feel that you do care – she doesn't expect you to make everything right again. She will appreciate your honesty about the way you feel.



Sexual responses

It is very important for you to be sensitive to the feelings of your wife/partner at this time. Even though you both lost a baby and you both need to grieve for that baby, the mother will also be experiencing physical changes. You may feel that your wife/partner is distancing herself from you. She may not want anything sexual in your relationship at the moment. This cannot be rushed or forced; it must be worked through slowly, with understanding for each other.

- She may feel physically or emotionally unable to be sexually intimate.
- She may feel being that intimate is an 'intrusion'.
- She may not want to risk becoming pregnant while she is feeling so much grief.
- It is important to show your wife/partner affection, without wanting things to go farther than she is able to handle.

It is also important to remember that you may be feeling equally uninterested.

However, it should not be anticipated that all couples experience these feelings after the death of a baby – but if you do, remember that they are quite normal.



Employment

It may be very difficult for you to return to work. When you return to work, you may find that:

- you're staring into space when you should be working
- you're making mistakes that you don't usually make
- your fellow workers avoid you
- your fellow workers don't acknowledge your baby
- you feel quite isolated
- you are unable to concentrate.

Once you return to work, your wife/partner may feel resentful or perhaps even angry that you distract yourself with your work, especially if she does not work outside the home or is not able to return to work immediately. Try to understand how she feels – for her, the days may be long and lonely. If you have children, her days may be busy but still incredibly sad.

You may also be eligible for paid parental leave. You can ring the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment on 0800 209020 for further information.



Distractions

You may find yourself using your work and/or leisure activities as a way to cover up your feelings. You may bury yourself in these things to avoid issues that have arisen since the death of your baby. You may work until you're overly tired, hoping it will help you sleep. You may work to try and forget your grief. This way of dealing with things can make the situation worse.

Work and leisure can be a distraction and can be a relief, but they are seldom the solution when taken to the extreme.



Some practical suggestions

There are many practical things you can do for your baby. Your baby was a real person who

existed. Often these practical things can be a great benefit to your grieving process and can help create special memories. These could include:

- photographing your baby
- making your baby's coffin and/or urn to contain the ashes
- co-ordinating the funeral/burial service, choosing special songs, music, readings, etc.
- digging and/or filling the grave
- making a cross to mark your baby's resting place.



In summary ...

No two people are the same. No two men grieve the same. You may experience some or all of the feelings we've mentioned, plus others. It is important that you are aware of your grief and find caring people who can support you.

The death of your baby will become a significant part of your life. You will never 'get over' what has happened, but you will learn to live with it. The pain will slowly lessen in time, but you will always remember the loss you have experienced.

Your local Sands group/supporter can be a great help in supporting you. In most areas, you will be able to talk to another father who understands what you are going through. Having contact with someone who has had a similar loss may be of help when you again meet workmates, friends and family who don't understand your loss.

For a list of groups or contact people around the country, see our website (sands.org.nz) and click on 'Sands Support' and 'Find Your Local Group'.