

A Fathers Grief

Traditionally, men are supposed to be supportive and strong and are not expected to show their own grief. But we now understand that this is an unrealistic expectation of anyone. When your baby dies, you are likely to feel the very same emotions of shock, anger, guilt and sadness that your partner feels. It is now widely accepted that bonding does not begin at birth but very early in the pregnancy, especially if you have seen your baby by scan or perhaps felt his/her movements by touching your partner's abdomen.

You may feel isolated and lonely while your partner is still in hospital. You will have to break the sad news to your family and friends and deal with many of the practical arrangements i.e. funeral arrangements.

There will be difficult decisions to make; if possible, make them with your partner and take your time to think about them. Decisions made together may prevent misunderstandings and resentment later.

At first you may find yourself suppressing your grief to a certain extent. However, it is important to express your own feelings of sadness and loss, sharing feelings with your partner will help her rather than make her feel worse.

If you have other children you may get to tell them together but this may not always be possible and the difficult task may be yours. In all maternity hospital/units there is either a, Medical Social Worker, Chaplain or Bereavement Midwife who could give you guidance on how best to do this. The ISANDS Booklet A Little Lifetime offers valuable information that would help you with this matter and many other important issues and decisions that need to be made. If a copy is not available to you in the hospital please do not hesitate to make contact with us.

You may have to resume work within a few days and is expected to carry on as normal. Many a father relates how he is often asked "How is your wife/partner" and never asked "how are your feeling or coping" This may be difficult for you but it is important to explain that you too are grieving.

When a baby dies both mother and father grieve intensely. Sometimes this can draw both of you together but in many cases can cause strain in the relationship. One of the strange things about grief is that sometimes it is too intensely personal to be shared completely with your partner. You are in it together but alone. It is therefore important at this stage to give each other time and space to grieve differently. There will be times when you want to cry together and times when you want to cry alone.

Excerpts from a letter from a father whose baby son, Ashley, died.

"My initial reaction on hearing that our baby had died was one of helplessness. Even in this age of equality, many men feel they have a protective role to play in relation to their families. They can feel that they have failed in this role when their babies die. You can feel exasperated by people assuming that only a mother can grieve for a loss like this. Whilst understanding the huge experience of life and loss it is for a mother; a father's losses are very real too."

In a work situation, or indeed, in other social situations, after the initial newness of the situation has worn off, people may occasionally enquire as to "how your wife is doing or coping?" No one asks "how are you coping?"

Paddy

Points to Consider

This can be a physically and emotionally draining time for you, visiting the hospital, making the necessary arrangements, ask family and friends to help with certain tasks:

- **Visiting cemetery with you and your partner to arrange burial**
- **Driving the car for the funeral**
- **Helping out with meals and other children.**

Take time off work - compassionate leave or sick leave. You will be distracted in your grief and might not be fit for work, especially if it involves driving or using machinery.

If emotions are suppressed, delayed reactions can occur maybe even months after the baby's death. Often it's not realised that these problems are associated with the loss, irritability, depression, anger, physical complaints. You too will need to grieve. Don't be afraid to express your emotions. Other fathers have found it helpful to attend the ISANDS Parent Support Meeting as they get the opportunity to meet other dad's who have had a similar experience.

"If someone close to you dies people shake your hand and offer you their condolences, when a baby dies before birth most people opt to ignore what's happened and talk about the weather".

Tony

"I had to carry our baby on her last journey in a little white coffin. I remember trying to be so gentle with her and although this was one of the saddest and most difficult moments of my life it was also a very special one. Katie had been carried by her mother for nine months - now it was my turn to carry her". **Brendan**

"My wife just cried and cried, I felt so helpless, I didn't realise just being there was enough". **Maurice**
