

Childbirth and Trauma: Empowering Strategies to Integrate Your Grief

The baby shower is over. The room is ready. Mom and dad and other family members are anxiously awaiting the arrival of a new little life to fill their lives with joy. Hopes, dreams and expectations are beyond sky high. But what happens when a parent's worst nightmare actually occurs...your baby traumatically dies during childbirth. How do parents, surviving children, and other family members live with that heart-shattering loss? How can they ever come to reconcile and integrate their child's life/death when they feel they've just been spiritually, emotionally, physically, cognitively and behaviorally assaulted beyond words?

There are no easy or one-size-fits-all answers to those questions. The death of a child of any age and the grief that follows, from my personal experience and in my professional opinion, is inherently a 'complicated' process because our children are not supposed to die before us. Additionally, when circumstances surrounding the death are sudden, traumatic, unexpected, and possibly preventable, it exacerbates an already difficult grieving process.

Our attachment to a child often begins when you first learn that you are pregnant. And as you talk about a new baby within the family excitement grows as the baby grows. Then when that special attachment is threatened and actually altered by a traumatic birth, you encounter emotions, thoughts, behaviors, and physical and spiritual pain you may never have envisioned yourself ever experiencing. It feels as if your entire insides have been ripped open never to be the same. You may scream out loud from your innermost core and cry or you may be in shock and not know what to say or do. There is no one way to respond to such a trauma, as there is no one way to grieve.

A traumatic death is also an assault on your identity as a mom or dad. When you are pregnant, you also assume you will go home with your child and be their parent. Yet, as others are cuddling and feeding their baby, you can only replay in your mind the incomprehensible moment you learned your baby was not going to have that life you dreamed about. That vision of possibly seeing the traumatic birth, and your physical and emotional experience at that moment may feel indelibly imprinted within your mind and body. Am I still a mom or dad? Did I fail as a parent? Was there anything anyone could have done? How will I/we ever get through this? Will I ever be able to deliver a full-term baby? What will my kids think of me/us as parents? What will my friends and colleagues think? Will others pity me and tell me to 'get over it' in 3 months?

Again, there are no easy answers. Yet, just by asking those questions and many others, will ultimately help you process your individual grief and your grief as a family. You may never get the answers that you want or hope for...but sharing these thoughts, feelings and questions outside of yourself, instead of trying to suppress them, is very healing.

Hopefully, in the midst of your immediate realization that your baby has died (of course the situation varies depending on individual circumstances surrounding the birth), you will have a staff that has some training in trauma and parental grief.

And by them understanding that this tragic life event will trigger acute stress responses from you as the parents, as well as surviving siblings (especially if they were there for the birth), and other family members, they can help all of you by normalizing and validating all of your raw responses. This will in many ways lay a healthy foundation for your grief process. They can also facilitate your having alone time with your baby, having a chance to wash and hold him/her, take family pictures, and take a lock of hair and hand and footprints.

Of course, there is a myriad of other factors that influence your grief response (ie., past unresolved losses, what you learned about grief growing up, your religious or spiritual beliefs, your support resources or lack of, etc), but having an empathic, compassionate and trained staff will help you, rather than make things more complicated for your long and unfolding journey.

Parental grief is a gut-wrenching roller-coaster ride of vacillating ups and downs, forward and back and inside and out twists and turns. And no one journey is the same. As a mom, your experience will be different than dad (ie., your relationship with the baby is different), and as parents it will be different than the surviving kids. Acknowledging that, and also becoming aware that your grief process may be more emotion focused versus thought/cognitive focused, will help with communication and processing within the parental unit as well as within the family.

Children will often respond in a variety of ways depending on their age and maturity. If they are toddlers or young children, they do not fully comprehend what death means and may appear to be NOT grieving, and go about their playing and asking the same questions over and over again. However, they may unconsciously pick up on your stress and behaviors of crying or getting angry for instance, and express their own stress by being clingy or having tantrums. As they reach their pre-teen and teen years they understand more about death and the pain that follows when a loved one is no longer physically here. Yet, they may feel different than their friends and not sure how to express their inner feelings and thoughts. They also may not want to talk with you because they think they may add to your pain.

That's why communication within the couple and family is so vital. When grief goes UNSPOKEN or underground, or you get 'stuck' in your emotions or staying 'in your head,' it becomes more painful and possibly leads to other chronic physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual problems. Post-traumatic stress symptoms (or disorder) is a possibility as well, and should be watched for and addressed if necessary. Intimacy issues between couples may also become an issue.

Outside the family, many won't know what to say or do for you, so they may totally avoid you. Or they may say things that are hurtful or dismiss your loss and pain,

such as “At least you didn’t get to really know this baby” or “There must have been something wrong and better at the beginning of life than later” or “You can always have another baby” or “God needed another angel.” These comments have actually been said to parents.

Saying NOTHING and just being present with the parents/family would be far better than saying something like the above! Comments like that often come from others not feeling comfortable about death in the first place. Unfortunately, within many families, death and grief becomes the ‘elephant in the room’ and the NO TALK RULE is put in place.

With the pro bono grief support that I offer bereaved parents and other adults living with loss, it’s all about making the CHOICE to actually SEE and TALK about that so-called ‘elephant.’ Feeling safe to share and express your innermost pain and sorrow, as well as joys, is what will help you move toward healing your mind/body/heart and spirit. It’s not about recovering or completing your grief or getting a final closure ~ it’s about reconciling what the loss of your child means to YOU and your FAMILY and about learning ways to INTEGRATE it in HEALTHY ways within your lives. But it certainly won’t happen overnight.

What are some ways to EMPOWER yourself over time as you move toward reconciling and integrating your grief? How can you work through your feelings of helplessness, loss of control, anger, guilt, fear, questioning your spiritual beliefs, and the myriad of other feelings, thoughts, and behaviors? Below are some suggestions that may help you.

- ♥ Give yourself and your children permission to grieve in your own way and in your own time. Often moms are given a lot more support than dads, but do NOT leave dads out of this very important life event and process! Also, acknowledge that it’s a process of proactively and constructively working from your ‘inside light’ out. It’s not something outside of you or something to fix. Honor the differences in grieving and be patient with yourself and family.
- ♥ Realize that you cannot go around, under or over grief ~ you must go through it to be open to [‘healing your fractured heart.’](#)
- ♥ You may choose to have a funeral service and burial for your baby, and include the children in the planning and actual service, as well as family and friends. Or you may not. Either way, it will be important for you to process whatever decision you make.
- ♥ Find positive and constructive ways to channel your feelings such as exercise, journaling, music, reading, gardening, art, volunteering, creating memory journals and boxes, creating a personal and/or family ritual that keeps your child’s spirit alive, just to name a few.

- ♥ Get as much information as you can via an autopsy or whatever the situation medically or legally calls for. However be aware, as with grief, not all questions may be answered fully or to your satisfaction. Learning to 'sit with what is' can be a difficult journey as well.
- ♥ Seek out healthy and constructive support via groups, family, friends, clergy, or professionals. Be aware that some may be too quick to pathologize your grief process. However, there are some situations that may benefit from professional assistance such as PTSD, clinical depression, alcohol/drug abuse etc.
- ♥ Children and teens may benefit from support groups, such as Ele's Place, where they are safe to share their loss with others their own age without being judged.
- ♥ Learn relaxation and mindfulness strategies ~ muscle relaxation, slow deep breathing, being in the present ~ working through grief is finding ways to open the channels between your mind, body and heart/spirit ~ we often block our process by getting stuck in our emotions, thoughts, and/or behaviors.
- ♥ Use guided imagery and visualization to tap into your divine self to help you draw strength from within ~ from your faith or from important role models in your life, or even your inner '[warrior spirit](#).'
- ♥ Explore your personal search for meaning ~ ask yourself why you are here on this earth and how can you find your passion and purpose in your life; a life that is spiritually enriched by your child's memory and light.
- ♥ Keep your child's life and death in the context of the family lifecycle ~ for instance, if this was your 1st child, talk with future children about their older brother or sister. You may not feel as if you have very many memories of your baby if he/she died in childbirth, but you can still share what hopes and dreams you had for your child, and whatever else you'd like to pass on to your other children.
- ♥ Your child may no longer be here physically, but you can still have a connection and relationship with them ~ be open to '[love messages](#)' you or your family may experience, such as 'coincidental' happenings. An example might be seeing an angel figure in the clouds on what would have been their 1st birthday. These types of experiences are NOT coincidences! If it's meaningful for YOU then it's a very real experience!

These strategies will not give you back what you really want and need...

But always remember, even in the darkest moments of our lives, we do have choices...my hope for you and your family, if you have experienced the death of a child, is to be open to the power of your child's spirit ~ it WILL lead you toward the light of healing.

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