

Sexual relationships after the death of a baby



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We are grateful to the many parents who have contributed to this booklet.



“Since our son was born not a day goes past when I don’t think about him and picture him in my arms. Continuing our sexual relationship hasn’t taken that away, but it has helped me and my husband grieve, support each other, and comfort each other when we’ve needed it most.” Mum



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Introduction

The grief that follows the death of a baby affects every aspect of a couple's lives, including their relationship and their sex life. This booklet is based on what bereaved parents have told us about what they needed to know, and how they felt and reacted. Most of the information is likely to be relevant to same-sex couples as well as heterosexual couples.

We hope that you and your partner will find this booklet useful.

Sex after the death of a baby

The effects of grief

The death of a baby is a major bereavement, and the grief that follows has a profound effect on people's ability to cope with every aspect of daily life. Most people expect their partner to comfort them and to be supportive and understanding when life is tough. But it's very hard to support someone when you are desperately sad and upset yourself.

There is no right or wrong way to grieve; everybody deals with grief in their own unique way. Grief tends to come and go in waves, so you may not always feel the same things or at the same time as your partner. This can cause misunderstandings and hurt feelings, and put real strain on a relationship.

"We dealt with our grief in completely different ways, we needed different types of support from each other, and what each of us needed from sex and intimacy was totally different." Mum

Intense grief can lead to sleep disturbance, loss of appetite and loss of sexual desire.

"I wanted to want sex but felt nothing." Mum

For more about grief and grieving please see our booklets *Saying goodbye to your baby* and *Mainly for fathers*.

Talking and listening

Understanding how your partner is feeling is very important. Try to set aside some time to talk and to listen to each other. Listening, and trying to accept the differences between you, can help you to avoid misunderstandings and prevent resentment building up.

“When we lost our son it turned our world upside down – everything we thought we understood about each other was questioned. We wanted to be close and help protect each other but it wasn’t that simple.” Mum

Talking and listening are not always easy. Some people find it very hard to express what they are feeling, while others desperately need to talk or cry. Many of us find it very hard to witness other people’s distress. We may also hide and bottle up our distress to avoid upsetting or hurting the person we love.

“It’s so easy to assume you know what your partner is feeling and thinking if you don’t talk. If you struggle to tell your partner how you feel, and don’t know what to say, feel embarrassed or silly, try writing it down.” Mum

It can be helpful to take a bit of pressure off your relationship by finding other sources of support: for example, talking to a supportive relative or friend, contacting our Helpline or going to a Sands support group. Being able to express your feelings to someone else, who won’t be hurt or judge you or tell you what to do, can help to release tension and make it easier for you and your partner to keep talking and listening to each other. Talking to someone other than your partner doesn’t mean that your relationship is threatened or that you are being disloyal.

Talking about sex

"We've never talked about sex. I still find it really embarrassing to say what I want." Mum

Although sexual intercourse is such an intimate act, many couples don't talk about it. When it comes to sex we often expect our partner to know what we want and like, and what we don't want and dislike. But it's very difficult to guess what someone else thinks and feels, and even more so when you are both experiencing profound grief.

Talking about sex after your baby has died may be easier if you have always discussed these things. If you haven't, it may be hard to start now. But it's very important to try to understand each other's needs and wishes and how each of you sees things.

"Despite everything, we were able to keep talking about our sex life and deal with it together." Dad

It's common for grieving parents to find that they have very different expectations and feelings about having sex. One person may regard sex as a way of getting close and gaining comfort, while the other needs to feel close and comforted before they feel able to have sex.

"Our physical needs were quite different. I just needed to be held tightly, to feel comforted, wanted, desired, reassured, but I didn't want sex. My husband needed sex to give him that comfort and reassurance." Mum

Telling your partner what you are feeling and that it's to do with you, not them, may help them not to feel rejected. Knowing that these difficulties are common and usually pass with time may also help.

Maintaining physical contact

When we are devastated and everything seems unbearable, simply being held can help us through. But if either of you is reluctant to have sex or simply can't face it, you may find yourselves avoiding any physical contact in case it's seen as an invitation to sex. This deprives both of you of the comfort that holding hands, a gentle touch or a hug can bring. Avoiding any physical contact may also drive you further apart.

Try to reach a clear understanding that kisses do not have to be sexual, and that hugs do not mean that either of you is ready for or wants sex. They are simply ways of comforting each other and of expressing support and togetherness. You could set yourselves a goal of at least two hugs a day even if you don't really feel like it. You could also give each other permission to ask for a hug whenever you need one, or decide simply to offer a hug when you see that your partner is struggling.

"In the early days a hug meant a lot. It made me feel close to her without having sex. We often fell asleep in each other's arms." Dad

If there is no physical contact between you for some time, it can be much harder to start again.

"We got out of the habit of having sex and didn't really feel the need to resume." Mum

Even if you only hug, kiss or hold hands occasionally, this can help to keep physical contact going and will make it easier to become intimate again.

Maintaining emotional contact

“Even if a sexual relationship takes time to return, make sure you are open and honest with each other about how you are feeling, and remain affectionate with each other.” Mum

However awful you are feeling, it’s important to try to make an effort to show that you appreciate each other, to tell your partner that you love him or her, and to spend time together. As soon as you feel able to, try to do things that you both used to enjoy doing together. This might be a candlelit dinner at home, a meal out, a walk in a favourite place, watching a favourite DVD, or maybe going to the cinema or a football match.

These moments may be difficult and upsetting at first. Doing something nice together can feel as though you are somehow forgetting your baby and moving on. But your baby will always be part of your lives, and your relationship with your partner is also very important.

When to start having sex

Physical factors

After any birth, most couples find that their sexual relationship changes, at least for a time. Many women find that their desire for sexual contact disappears and that the vaginal secretions that accompany arousal are reduced. In addition, many women have to cope with tiredness, tender breasts, soreness, stitches, or a caesarean scar.

From a physical point of view, there is no right or wrong time to start having sex again. However, after any birth, it's important to prevent infection by good hygiene, and to wait until the woman's vagina is completely healed and the cervix (the neck of the womb) is closed again. Before then, there is a risk of infection getting into the mother's blood stream. Oral sex (when the woman is the recipient) should also be avoided because there is a small but serious risk of air getting into the mother's blood stream which can be fatal. Healing usually takes around six weeks, so most couples wait until after the mother's six-week check-up before having vaginal or oral sex, or inserting anything into her vagina.

Contraception

It's important to remember that, unless the couple has fertility problems, a woman can get pregnant again, even very soon after giving birth. So unless you are desperate to have another baby as soon as possible, you may want to use some form of contraception (for more about when to try for another baby, see page 18).

How you may feel about having sex

People's feelings about starting to have sex again can be very complicated and vary a great deal from person to person. Few, if any, couples will experience all of the reactions described below. But it may be helpful to know about the range of feelings that other bereaved parents have had. As well as reading how others have reacted, you could also contact our Helpline or go onto our online forum to see if others share your feelings.

The important thing to remember is that there is no right or wrong way to react, and that whatever you are feeling, you are almost certainly not the only one.

Many women lose all sexual desire for a time. If their partner wants to have sex, they may say yes before they are really ready.

"I had absolutely no physical urge, no desire whatsoever, but felt obliged to have sex with my husband, to offer him some form of physical comfort. So I pretended and went along with his needs." Mum

Agreeing to have sex does not mean that grief is less overwhelming or that everything is getting back to normal.

"My husband started to look for more from me than just emotional support, he wanted physical contact. This was the furthest thing from my mind. I think he probably thought that if he felt OK enough to want sex, then I must too." Mum

Although it's often true that men want to have sex sooner than their partners, this is certainly not universal.

"I was keen for our sex life to become more fun again and for us to really want it instead of just doing it because we thought we should. But my partner found sex a bit of a chore – he was still grieving strongly for our daughter. He struggled to put his pain aside for a while so we could have sex." Mum

Some men may avoid sex after the birth of a baby because they are worried about hurting their partner. Some may find that witnessing a difficult birth affects their sex drive.

"I wanted to feel close to her as I nearly lost her as well as our baby. But I was also scared of getting close to her, I didn't know how she would react." Dad

It can be difficult to know what to do if one of you is ready for sex and the other is not. A flat refusal can feel like rejection. Try to explain that you still love your partner and want to be close but you are just not ready for sex. It may help if you can also say how you are feeling and why you are not quite ready. You could try other forms of sexual contact that don't involve vaginal sex but enable the partner who wants it to have an orgasm.

"You may have to wait for longer than you might think." Dad

Depression, low self-esteem and self-blame

Depression is common with grief and may affect one or both parents' desire for and response to sexual contact. Both men and women may also suffer from postnatal depression and this can have the same effect.

Many mothers feel they have failed and may have very low self esteem. Some may not be able to see themselves as being attractive any more.

"I hated myself, I blamed myself, I couldn't even look at myself in a mirror. I was disgusted with my body, how I looked, how I felt - my daughter had died and I had been unable to protect her." Mum

It's quite common for mothers to feel that their baby's death was somehow their fault. It may be helpful to discuss this with someone, for example, your GP, midwife, hospital consultant or health visitor.

If a mother feels that she is no longer attractive or desirable, it's important for her partner to tell her that she is still loved and wanted. She may not believe this at first, but being told repeatedly may help her to regain her self esteem. At the same time, it is important to make sure that she isn't feeling pressurised into having sex.

"I had an extremely traumatic and scary delivery when our daughter was stillborn. Afterwards, I couldn't associate 'down-there' with anything nice or positive! I certainly didn't feel sexy or attractive!" Mum

Grief, guilt and memories

Having sex may bring back memories and renewed grief.

"We had stopped having sex when I found out I was pregnant, so I just kept thinking, the last time I did this we made our daughter." Mum

It's quite common for one or both bereaved parents to feel guilty about feeling any pleasure, or to think that they are somehow letting their baby down by starting to have sex again.

"I felt that having sex would be like a step towards forgetting our son – that we would be moving on and trying to replace him – even though we weren't trying for a baby." Mum

But feeling pleasure doesn't mean that you have forgotten about your baby or that you no longer care about him or her. Try to remember that it's perfectly alright to enjoy sex and other things in life even when you are grieving.

"If there is one thing I have learnt, it's not to feel guilty for having sex with my partner again. It's another way of being close to each other." Mum

If the birth was traumatic or if the mother's life was endangered, sex may trigger flashbacks.

"In the early days and weeks after our daughter's stillbirth, I found it almost impossible to manage anything more than an intimate hug and a cuddle. I would end up having flashbacks and just feel disengaged and numb." Mum

"On occasions I would suddenly find tears streaming down my face. I felt nothing, emotionally, physically. I felt unconnected and confused. How could an act, so beautiful, so normal, feel so horrible and abnormal?" Mum

If depression, intrusive thoughts or flashbacks persist for either partner for longer than a few months, talk to your GP who may refer you to a counsellor.

Practical matters

“When we did make love I was scared of hurting her.” Dad

When you both feel able to have sex again, try to take it slowly and gently. Sexual contact can take many forms. At first it may be better to aim for physical closeness, kisses, caresses and massage rather than for vaginal sex. Although you may find it difficult, you probably need to talk about it beforehand. Tell each other what you think you would feel OK about and what you would find difficult right now. Then try to go at the pace that the most reluctant partner can manage.

If you have vaginal sex soon after birth, and if the mother has had perineal stitches (the area between her vagina and her back passage), try to avoid positions that put pressure on the back wall of the vagina. Similarly, if she has had a caesarean, choose a position that avoids putting pressure on her scar. You may also find it helps to use a lubricant.

“Because it hurt, I just kept being reminded that the last time I’d used that part of me was to have my baby.” Mum

How you may react

“It was a very strange experience for us both and not similar to any previous lovemaking. I was nervous and oversensitive, still in protective mode.” Dad

When you do have sex, one or both of you may find that it releases strong feelings you had not expected. This is quite common and nothing to worry about. If it happens try holding each other until the feelings subside.

“When we did eventually have sex it was so emotional. Overwhelming even. It continued to be very emotional for a number of weeks.” Mum

Another pregnancy?

The decision to try for another baby is very personal. For some couples, another pregnancy is not an option for medical or personal reasons. For others there is a choice, but making the decision to try again may not be easy and there are several things to think about.

Timing

Some parents want to try for another baby very quickly, others cannot face the idea.

"I knew that I wanted another baby straight away, not to replace our baby daughter but because, as a mother, I felt completely lost without a baby." Mum

There is no right or wrong time to start another pregnancy, but it makes sense to wait until the mother has recovered physically from the birth and has had at least one period.

Because anniversaries of a baby's death and the run-up to them are often accompanied by new waves of grief, some people think that it's better if the anniversary does not coincide with the birth of another baby. Anniversaries are also times when families may choose to do something special to remember their baby. This may be a visit to a memorial garden, the baby's grave or the site where the ashes were scattered. These are sad occasions and are difficult to combine with celebrations for the arrival of a new baby and his or her birthday in the years to come.

Other people's views

Friends and family members often encourage a couple to have another baby, assuming that this will “help” or that a new baby will somehow replace the baby who has died. They may also think that once you have another baby, you will “get over” your grief and your lives can get back to normal. However, bereaved parents know that each baby is an individual and is irreplaceable. Having another baby, however welcome, does not mean that the baby who has died will be forgotten.

“Many people suggested that we should try for another baby. But it was important to us not to try before we were ready and had had time to grieve.” Dad

Ideally, starting another pregnancy should be something that both partners feel ready for. However sometimes one parent cannot even think about having another baby for quite some time, while the other is desperate to try as soon as possible. If the drive to have another baby is very strong, sex may become mechanical rather than a loving and spontaneous part of a couple's relationship.

“I went against doctor's advice and started to try as soon as the bleeding stopped. It was the only way I could cope. I wanted a baby so badly. I got obsessed with my cycles and my husband definitely felt he had to ‘perform’. It was not what lovemaking should be, only a means to an end.” Mum

Anxiety

For some, the thought of another pregnancy often brings with it fears and anxiety that the same thing could happen again.

"We would both like to try again, but are very scared that we'll lose another baby. This still affects us when we get close." Mum

Any pregnancy that follows the death of a baby before, during or shortly after birth is bound to be stressful. It may also lead to another period without sex as one or both partners worry about doing anything that might harm the growing baby. If this is an issue for either of you, it may be helpful to talk to your midwife or doctor and to ask what the risks might be.

For more about pregnancy after the death of a baby, please see our booklet *Another pregnancy: for parents whose baby has died*.

Conclusion

Recovering physically and emotionally after the death of a baby, and getting back to what one parent calls a 'new normal', takes time. Resuming your sex life may also take time.

It helps if you:

- ▶ Keep talking and listening.
- ▶ Maintain physical contact such as holding hands, hugs and kisses.
- ▶ Take time to do the things together that you both used to enjoy.
- ▶ Find out what your partner feels and needs.
- ▶ Tell your partner what you feel and need.
- ▶ Try to accept that your needs and feelings may be different from those of your partner.
- ▶ Remember that needs and feelings are likely to change over time.
- ▶ Tell your partner that you still love him or her, and that if you say no to sex it does not mean you are rejecting him or her.
- ▶ When you do have sex, take things slowly and gently.

"Since our son was born not a day goes past when I don't think about him and picture him in my arms. Continuing our sexual relationship hasn't taken that away, but it has helped me and my husband grieve, support each other, and comfort each other when we've needed it most." Mum

Information and support

Other charities that can offer support

Bliss - the special care baby charity

www.bliss.org.uk

Support, advice and information for families of babies in intensive care and special care, including bereaved families.

Helpline: 0500 618 140 Email: hello@bliss.org.uk

Child Bereavement UK

www.childbereavement.org.uk

Supporting families when a child dies and when a child is bereaved.

Support and information: 01494 568 900

Email: support@childbereavementuk.org

Miscarriage Association

www.miscarriageassociation.org.uk

Support and information for those affected by pregnancy loss.

Network of support groups and telephone contacts throughout the UK.

Helpline: 01924 200 799 Email: info@miscarriageassociation.org.uk

TAMBA Bereavement Support Group

www.tamba-bsg.org.uk

Support for families who have lost one or more children from a multiple birth. (Part of the Twins and Multiple Births Association – TAMBA)

Helpline: 0800 138 0509 Email: Use the form on their website

Other useful addresses

Relate, the relationship people

www.relate.org.uk

Offers counselling on relationship, family and sexual issues. The website has a helpful section about what sex therapy involves. Fees are charged to cover the costs of counselling sessions. In some Relate centres, bursaries may be available to reduce the cost.

Helpline: 0300 100 1234 Email: enquiries@relate.org.uk

The Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships

www.tccr.org.uk

Offers relationship and sexual counselling in London only. Fees are charged on a sliding scale according to income.

Tel: 020 7380 1960 Email: counselling@tccr.org.uk

How Sands can help

Sands is a national charity offering information and emotional support when a baby dies before, during, or shortly after birth.

17 babies are stillborn or die shortly after birth every day in the UK, and each year we support thousands of families whose babies have died.

At Sands there are people who understand what it's like, because many of us have been through this devastating experience ourselves.

You may not want anything from us right away. We are here to help whenever you feel you need it. That may be now or in a few weeks, months or even years.

As well as supporting mothers, fathers and same sex partners, we are also here to help other members of the family and the many other people who may be touched by a baby's death, including friends, colleagues and health care staff. All are welcome to contact us for support and information.

Do you want to speak to someone on our helpline?	020 7436 5881
Do you want to email the Helpline for support?	helpline@uk-sands.org
Do you want to connect with others whose baby has died?	www.sandsforum.org
Do you want to find out about a Sands group near you?	helpline@uk-sands.org
Do you want to know about our other support booklets?	Please see page 25
Do you want to see what's on offer at our shop?	www.shop-sands.org/ shop/
Do you want to know more about what we do?	www.uk-sands.org
Do you want to make a donation or fundraise?	fundraising@uk-sands.org
Do you want to write to us?	Sands, 3rd Floor, 28 Portland Place, London, W1B 1LY

Sands support resources

If you would like more information on any of the subjects we have mentioned, please see our current list of Sands booklets below. You can read or download copies of our booklets on the Support section of our website www.uk-sands.org or you can order copies from our online shop www.shop-sands.org/shop or by calling 0845 6520 448.

Sands booklets

When a baby dies before labour begins

Saying goodbye to your baby

Deciding about a post mortem: information for parents

Mainly for fathers

Supporting children when a baby has died

Sexual relationships after the death of your baby

Information and support for grandparents

For family and friends: how you can help

Returning to work after the death of your baby

Information for employers: helping a bereaved parent return to work

Another pregnancy: for parents whose baby has died

Notes

About Sands

Sands, the stillbirth and neonatal death charity, was founded in 1978 by a small group of bereaved parents who were devastated by the death of their babies, and by the total lack of acknowledgement and understanding of the significance and impact of their loss.

Since that time, we have supported many thousands of families whose babies have died, offering emotional support, comfort and information. Today Sands operates throughout the UK and focuses on three main areas of work:

We support anyone affected by the death of a baby

Bereavement support is at the core of everything we do. Some of the services that we offer include:

- ▶ Helpline for parents, families, carers and health professionals
- ▶ UK-wide network of support groups run by trained befrienders
- ▶ Online forum and message boards enabling bereaved families to connect with others
- ▶ Website and a wide range of booklets, books and other resources.

We work in partnership with health professionals to try to ensure that bereaved parents and families receive the best possible care

We offer resources and a comprehensive programme of training, workshops and talks for health professionals that give practical guidance on how to meet parents' needs and provide good bereavement care.

We promote and fund research that could help to reduce the loss of babies' lives

The UK has one of the highest rates of perinatal death in the developed world. The shocking reality is that, in spite of medical advances, 17 babies are stillborn or die under one month old every day.

We raise vital funds for research and campaign for the government to address this situation as a matter of priority.

We depend on the extraordinary energies of our supporters to raise the vital funds that we need to deliver the wide range of services that we offer.

If you would like any further information or support please contact us or visit our website.

Support:

t: 020 7436 5881

e: helpline@uk-sands.org

Enquiries:

t: 020 7436 7940

e: info@uk-sands.org

Write to us:

3rd Floor, 28 Portland Place,
London, W1B 1LY

Website:

www.uk-sands.org