

For family & friends - how you can help



When a baby dies either before birth (a stillbirth) or shortly after (a neonatal death), everyone will be stunned by the event. The parents return from hospital with empty arms, facing the pain and stress of bereavement.

You may not have known the baby but to the parents their child was a real person, one they have come to know and love during the months of pregnancy. Although you cannot see a gap in the family there is a real loss.

"We are a family that will never be complete."

The sense of bereavement is as strong as with the death of an adult or older child, and more unexpected because death has no place at birth.

Both parents will have a mixture of feelings, which are a normal response to loss. These may include:

Shock – because they expected birth and life but got death.

Disbelief – they may not be able to accept what has happened.

Guilt – either parent may feel that their baby died because of something they did, or did not do – especially if no medical cause is found.

Isolation – because no one seems to understand their situation.

Jealousy and bitterness – because everyone else seems to be pregnant or wheeling a pram.

Anger – against their partner, the GP, the hospital staff or God.

How you can help

Do get in touch – don't assume that they would rather be alone.

Don't avoid the parents – don't avoid the situation.

If you are a close friend or family member you may find our leaflet *Information and support for grandparents* helpful.

You can get in touch by letter, email or phone to show your concern. Parents often keep sympathy cards with other reminders of their baby such as photographs and cot tags.

If you are pregnant yourself, or have a small baby you may feel that the bereaved parents would rather you didn't visit. Ring up and ask. They may not be ready to face you or your child, or they may be glad to see live healthy babies and be hurt if you keep your child from them.

Visit in person, and let yourself be guided about what to do. Give both parents a chance to talk about their experience. They will usually not need much encouragement and it does help them.

Find out if they have named their baby and do use the baby's name.

Ask if they have photographs or other mementoes of their baby. If the parents want to share these with you, don't be afraid to look at them.

Don't be embarrassed or feel guilty if they cry. You did not cause the tears, they were waiting to be shed. Don't be afraid to cry yourself, you are showing that you care.

Remember that both the mother and the father have lost a child. Encourage others to get in touch, and keep in touch yourself.

What to say

Don't worry too much about saying the 'right' thing.

"I found it easier to accept and forgive those who blundered than those who seemed not to care."

Do say that you are sorry.

Do be willing to talk about the baby.

Do remember that bereaved parents can be very sensitive to what you may say.

Do be willing to sit and listen.

Don't say "You are lucky you have other children" or "You'll soon have another baby" as this can be hurtful. The parents are grieving for the baby that has died. Other children will not be a replacement.

Don't try to blame anyone for the baby's death. Even if the parents do so.

Don't say "I know how you feel" unless you have also lost a baby.

Don't give advice about they 'should' do.

Grief goes on

Recovery from the death of a baby takes many months, even years. Parents should not be expected to 'get over it' in a few weeks, but friends and family may feel that there is little more they can do to help. Suggest that the parents get in touch with Sands locally, so they can meet others whose baby has died. Sands members can understand their needs and offer support and friendship. You can find the name and number of your nearest Sands group from the Sands Helpline (see back page for contact details).

You should be ready to help parents when they need it for a long time to come. The next pregnancy can be a very nervous time, and a new baby will not put everything right – it may bring back a lot of sad memories.

"Everyone is supportive and caring. They expect me still to be sad sometimes, which helps, because the pain doesn't go away just because you have another baby."

The parents may need extra sympathy and understanding on anniversaries and birthdays, at Christmas or other special occasions. They will never forget their baby that died, but the acute sadness will grow less with time.

About Sands

Sands, the stillbirth and neonatal death charity, was founded in 1978 by a small group of bereaved parents 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 practical help. Sands today 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 with trained befrienders
- ▶ Online forum and message boards enabling bereaved families to connect with others
- ▶ Website and a wide range of leaflets, 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 undertake a comprehensive programme of training, workshops and talks for health professionals based on the Sands Guidelines which 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

In spite of medical advances, the shocking reality is that each day in the UK there are eleven babies who are stillborn and six who die within the first 28 days of life. Through our Why17? campaign, we are raising vital funds for research, while challenging government to address these individual tragedies as a matter of urgency and 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.

Contact Sands:

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

t: 020 7436 7940 **f:** 020 7436 3715

e: info@uk-sands.org

w. www.uk-sands.org

Support:

t: 020 7436 5881

e: helpline@uk-sands.org

Sands message boards:

www.sandsforum.org

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