

## Coping with your feelings

At first you may feel that your whole existence is taken up with grief. You may also feel that life has no purpose now that the plans you made for your future with your baby have been swept away. It takes quite a long time for these feelings to begin to fade and for the grief to become less overwhelming. You may find that crying and talking about your baby are good ways of releasing pent-up feelings. You may want to tell your story over and over again. You may find it helpful to write down what happened and how you feel day by day. You may want to write poetry, draw or paint, or you might just want to do nothing at all.

Some parents feel unable to express their feelings or talk about their baby, while others prefer to do so only with those close to them. This is also a good coping strategy. Factors to beware of include working too hard, self-medicating or the use of alcohol.

Because grief can come in waves, you may sometimes find that you can cope in a perfectly normal manner for hours or even days. Some parents feel guilty about this and feel that they are being disloyal to their baby. But it doesn't mean that they have forgotten or don't care. It is quite normal to have periods of calm and normality between waves of acute sadness.

## Grief and couples

*"At the start it was very hard. Neither of us wanted to talk about our son for fear of upsetting the other. At times it seemed as if we were drifting further apart. Eventually we realized that we were both hurting and we then started to talk more about our son, it has taken a long while but we have survived and become closer as a couple."* Mother

Bereaved couples often feel cut off from each other. It is extremely hard to give support and understanding to someone else when you are in such need of support yourself. The way that grief comes and goes means that you and your partner may not feel or need the same things at the same time. You may also have different ways of expressing and dealing with your feelings.

For most mothers, the death of their baby is intensely physical as well as emotional. The baby that has been growing and moving inside her is suddenly gone.

After the birth, her body still reacts as though she has a baby to care for. Many women are also more inclined to focus on their feelings and to want their partner to acknowledge these. They may need to cry and to be allowed to feel sad. They may need continuing reassurance that there was nothing that they could have done to prevent their baby dying. Many fathers put their feelings on hold and get through by focusing on supporting the mother and planning for the future. Other people often assume that men will be strong and just keep going. Fathers are also generally expected to return to work very soon after the death of their baby and this too may lead some men to ignore their grief and to focus on "getting on with life". For more information for fathers, see the section on the Féileacáin website *Support for Fathers*.

*"I think we drifted apart. I think my partner thought that I wasn't grieving our daughter. She seemed to think that I was moving on with my life without her and my daughter. She doesn't realize how hard it is for me as well, and maybe if we had spoken more about our feelings at the time, we wouldn't be in this mess. Right now I don't know if I have the energy to fight for us anymore."* Father

It is easy to see why bereaved couples may misunderstand each other and how this can lead to anger, hurt feelings and arguments. These are all the more distressing at a time when many couples feel that they should be especially close and should be supporting each other. Such difficulties can affect all aspects of a couple's relationship, including their sex life. While sex may be a source of comfort and intimacy for one partner, the other may not even be able to consider the idea, especially soon after the baby's death. It is important to try to be patient and gentle with each other. Try to tell each other how you feel, and to really listen to each other-even if this is very difficult. Try to accept what your partner is saying and doing, even if his or her reactions are very different from your own. It may help if each of you gets some support from other people so that you do not rely totally on each other. You may also find it helpful to attend local Féileacáin support meetings together, partly to hear how other couples are managing.

## Children

Children can be deeply affected when a baby dies. Toddlers and young children may be quick to sense changes in the people who are close to them, even if they are too young to understand what has happened. This can make some children feel anxious and insecure. They may behave badly or act up which can be extremely hard for distressed parents to deal with.

Parents of older children may be unsure how to talk to them about the baby's death, how much to involve them, and whether they should or should not attend the funeral.

If you have other children, you may want to read the section on the Féileacáin website *Other Children*. Féileacáin also has a number of books within our library that parents can read with their children to help them discuss what has happened and how they feel.

## Grandparents

Grandparents grieve when an expected granddaughter or grandson dies. It is also very painful for them to see their own child and his or her partner so unhappy, and to feel powerless to make it better. We have heard from grandparents that it can be a double loss, the loss of their grandchild and the loss of their child for a while.

Some grandparents may also be reminded of their own childbearing losses. They may never have spoken about them and are unlikely to have been well cared for or supported. Some might like to read the section on the Féileacáin website *Long ago bereaved*.

## Other people

Family and friends are likely to be shocked by your baby's death and may not know how to react. You may also find it hard to express just how overwhelmed and devastated you feel. Sometimes, parents are lucky enough to have one or more friends or family members who really listen and who don't get uncomfortable or upset when they cry.

*"People think that men don't cry or don't feel. They think that we don't need to be comforted. While everyone else was concerned about my wife my best friend came up to me and just gave me a hug. The tears just flowed from me. I will be forever grateful to him because he made me open up. He helped me to carry some of the pain."* Father

However, most people simply don't understand the impact of the death of a baby. Some may worry that mentioning your baby will upset you and may try to talk about other things, or may avoid you altogether. A few friends and acquaintances may even cross the road to avoid having to say anything at all. People may also say things that are hurtful in an attempt to provide comfort, such as, "It was probably for the best" or, "At least you can have other children". As a result, you may feel cut off even from the people who used to be closest to you.

It can be particularly hard if you have a close friend, family member or acquaintance who is pregnant or has a young baby. You will probably know several couples whose babies were due about the same time as yours, especially if you attended antenatal classes. Don't blame yourself if you don't want to see them or feel unable to return their calls. Try also not to feel hurt by people who don't contact you; they almost certainly don't know what to say. Perhaps, before your baby died, you too would have found it hard to know what to say and do.

Many parents find it easier to talk to others who have had similar experiences. Some contact the Féileacáin helpline, Féileacáin forum, Facebook page or a Féileacáin support group very soon after their loss, others wait weeks or months. When they do, most say that the comfort of being able to say exactly how they feel, and of being completely accepted and understood, is invaluable. It helps them not to feel so alone.



## Grief and grieving



**Féileacáin**

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(SANDAI)

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Feileacain gratefully acknowledge the support of SANDS UK in the compilation of this leaflet.*



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