

## Telling your family and friends

*“As I had had an emergency caesarian under general anaesthetic, telling our family and friends fell to my husband. In a way I was glad, but couldn’t believe that he had to tell them the most devastating news.” Mother*

One of the loneliest and most painful tasks, which often falls to partners, is to phone family members and friends to break the sad news. Families and friends are usually eagerly awaiting a phone call and are ready with questions about the baby’s sex, name and weight. You could start with, “I am afraid I have bad news”. This can help to set the tone of the call and may reduce the number of inappropriate questions. Of course, family members and friends are likely to be shocked and may not know what to say. Some parents say that they end up supporting the people who should be supporting them.

Try not to feel that you have to tell everyone immediately. Also, try not to feel that you have to answer everyone’s questions. Only say as much as you feel able to. You could follow up your calls with an email or text giving more information about what has happened. This allows you to keep calls short and can give people time to compose a more thoughtful response.

*“For business acquaintances and some of those living abroad I sent emails. Some of the replies I got were genuinely lovely. We also put our daughter’s death in the obituary section of our local paper. It felt important to acknowledge her short life, and we got so many lovely cards and letters from this, which we will always treasure.” Father*

You may want to ask someone close to you to phone other people on your behalf and let them know what has happened. Tell this person what you would like them to say, including whether and how you want other people to contact you in the first few days. For example, you might prefer people to send cards, emails or texts rather than phone.



*How you might feel*



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## How you might feel

Every parent's experience is individual, and every circumstance is different, but the death of a baby can bring a grief that is deeper and lasts much longer than other people realise. Many parents say that they never knew it was possible to feel such sadness, and that their lives are turned completely upside down. You may experience all sorts of emotional and physical reactions following the death of your baby, some of which you may not expect.

## Emotional reactions

Most parents feel shocked and numb, especially in the first few days after their baby's death. You may find it hard to take in what has happened, and also hard to understand and remember what people are saying. You may cry and sob, even when you are not expecting to. Some parents wake up and find that they have been crying in their sleep. Some wake up feeling alright for a split second, and then remember what has happened.

*"I remembering waking up after a fitful night's sleep, the morning after our daughter died. For just a second, I forgot what had happened. Then it hit me like a ton of bricks and I just cried. I wanted to go back to that place of oblivion where it wasn't real and I didn't have to deal with it."* Father

Both parents may lose their confidence and self-esteem. Mothers in particular may feel guilty and blame themselves for their baby's death. Some feel that they have let their baby, their partner or their family down. But the death of a baby hardly ever has anything to do with what the mother or the parents did or did not do.

*"I felt huge guilt over our son's death. I had been his vessel for nine months. It was my job to deliver him safely into the world and when that didn't happen I felt it had to have been my fault. I hadn't smoked, hadn't drank or done anything to put him in danger, yet still the guilt was awful. There are times I still struggle with that."* Mother

Anger is a common reaction to loss. You may be angry with yourself, with your partner, with your baby for making you feel so alone, with God, or with the health professionals who cared for you or your baby. You may also be angry with parents who have healthy babies. When your own life has fallen apart, it can be very difficult to accept that, for most people, life is going on as normal.

Parents who lose one of twins or triplets often face conflicting emotions: grief for the baby who has died, as well as hopes and fears for a vulnerable new baby or babies. This is especially hard to deal with.

*"It was very hard. No-one knew what to say or do, least of all ourselves. We were delighted that our son had been born but devastated to have lost his brother. It has been very hard, every milestone our son has reached, and we know that his brother should have been alongside him doing the same thing."* Mother

## Physical reactions to grief

Many bereaved parents have physical reactions to grief. These can feel very similar to intense fear. You may have palpitations or chest pains. You may feel a heavy weight on your chest or find yourself sighing a lot. You may feel sick and have diarrhoea; you may have a lump in your throat or butterflies in your stomach. You may not feel like eating anything, or you may find that you can't stop eating. You may feel exhausted but find it difficult to sleep. Your sleep may also be disturbed by very vivid dreams or nightmares.

If your baby spent time in the neonatal unit, you may have had to cope with a roller-coaster of emotions as his or her condition changed. You may also have had the stress of travelling long distances to and from home to get to the neonatal unit. You may be physically, as well as emotionally drained.

Bereaved parents often say that their arms literally ache for the baby they were expecting to hold and care for. Some mothers still feel their baby kicking inside them, others hear their baby crying. You may search for things without being quite sure what you are looking for. It may feel comforting to curl up, or you may find yourself rocking back and forth with grief. All these reactions are common and normal.

*"I couldn't believe the physical pains. My arms physically ached to hold my baby. My breasts hurt so much, my body didn't realize that my baby had died and all these physical reminders were very hard to deal with. I went to my daughter's funeral with cabbage leaves inside my bra to try to take away the pain. The pain in my chest was real, sometimes I struggled to breath. I felt my heart break the day my daughter died."* Mother

Even though her baby has died, a mother's body will react in just the same way as it does when she has given birth to a live baby. She will have the usual vaginal blood loss (lochia) that follows birth, and her breasts may start to produce milk. These physical reminders of the baby can be both painful and distressing. There are ways of suppressing the milk supply and easing the pain. Your midwife, doctor or public health nurse should explain these to you.

Many mothers also get "after pains" as the uterus contracts back to its normal size. Some have painful stitches or a caesarean scar and will need pain relief. In addition to their grief, many mothers get the normal "postnatal blues" a few days after the birth.