

There is no simple answer as to what to say or do for someone who is bereaved, as each person has his or her own way of grieving and may have different needs. To be able to help, you must **listen** carefully to that person and take it from there. Often just being there, to listen to and reflect with the grieving mother, talking about the one(s) that have died, or are expected to die, is the most valuable thing anyone can do. What multiple birth families have to offer that is unique is their empathy, not just their sympathy. You know exactly what it is like to be the parent of multiple birth children, and can project more successfully than any other parent into what it may be like if you were experiencing the tragedy and grief of such a loss.

Grieving is the normal emotional response to any significant loss or to the death of a loved one. It is the space and time it takes to work through the grief process and get on with living, and it differs for each individual. Some grieving will continue throughout life, but will not stay as painful all the time. The process of maternal grief involves and is affected by the change to, or loss of, the existing bond between mother and child.

In her grieving, the bereaved mother often experiences bonding processes with the dead baby(ies), reliving the hopes and dreams she has for the child/ren. Over time the pain should decrease as recovery or healing begins. When the initial shock has worn off, a bereaved mother begins to feel all sorts of emotions and needs continued care from her friends and family.

There are many stages through which a bereaved person passes in order to resolve the grief, such as shock, denial, anger, sadness, despair etc. Not all people experience every stage, nor in the same order. Some may find they miss one out altogether.

Anger is a natural reaction of many bereaved people and if it occurs, it needs to be expressed so it does not turn inwards and lead to guilt feelings taking over. Expressing this anger may happen at a most unexpected time with someone who is not at all familiar with the personal situation of the angry bereaved person, let alone expecting to hear the anger being expressed. A bereaved mother needs someone to listen to her, to accept the

intensity of her anger, whether understanding her reasons for it or not. The hardest question (or one of the hardest questions) is "Why?" There may never be a satisfactory answer.

It is normal for the grieving mother to experience extreme or quickly changing emotions, along with feelings of anxiety about the health and wellbeing of other family members, fear of or anxiety about further pregnancies, and a change in her ability to trust others, at least for a few months or years. Also, it is normal for bereaved parents to revert to some of these experiences and emotions when at some future time another challenge, loss or death occurs. A mother may need to talk about her fears and be listened to and understood. The loneliness and sadness of her grief is very common but often not well understood by those around her.

SO WHAT CAN YOUR CLUB, OR YOU THE INDIVIDUAL, DO?

- **Acknowledge** the death as soon as possible (or as soon as you find out).

So often, contact is not made because we hear of a death that was "so long ago and we don't want to upset the parent by bringing it up now" BUT it is far more helpful to start out a communication with a sentence like, "I/we were just so saddened and dismayed to hear, only yesterday, that your baby John had died. I/we know it was months ago, but I/we just wanted to let you know that if you need me/us, we are here for you at any time."

Telephone the family, arrange to visit if this is acceptable, send a card or a letter from your AMBA member-club (or your own personal one) mentioning the deceased child or children by name. Let the family know that if they desire contact with other bereaved parents known in your own or another club, you can give them that information, now or perhaps at a later date. (If possible ensure this contact is with a family where a similar bereavement situation has occurred.)

Advise them also of the support that is available to them through the member of your club who is responsible for bereavement, or the similar person on your state committee.

Be sensitive to the fact that the parents of a surviving twin or of surviving HOM children may feel unable to attend club activities with other multiple birth families because they may feel they don't belong. Equally, they may feel they don't fit in at a SANDS meeting because they have one or more surviving children. It may be even harder for those families where both twins, or all multiples, have died.

Respect the family's wishes, and if it is requested that no contact be made by you or your club, please do as the family requests and discontinue follow-up.

- **Provide practical help**

Providing a cake or a tasty meal is a helpful gesture towards the family, as the mother may not feel like cooking for a while.

Offer to mind or help with the other siblings, if any, to give the mother a few hours' break or a chance to visit a tiny survivor in hospital. If there is no immediate family living nearby, then this may be most beneficial.

- **Call in for a friendly chat or 'cuppa'**

Many bereaved people spend a great deal of time alone. They may dwell in grief, fear and despair. During those empty hours and days, they may find that nothing is more soothing than the presence of an understanding friend. However, as a visitor you need to be aware that some people wish to be alone and could look on your visit as an intrusion. Other bereaved parents may feel that they cannot talk to people who have not experienced the loss of a child, so do not feel rejected if your help is refused.

- **Continue to call regularly**

Many weeks after the death, people begin to disappear and often, that is when contact is most appreciated. Just when a mother is feeling better and thinks she is coping, she could find herself having days of depression, which could be sparked off by seeing other pregnant women, and twins or twin strollers at shopping centres, reading a book with twins featured in it, or passing a bookstore displaying books on various maternal topics, or watching TV programs or movies with infant themes. Anniversaries and

celebrations such as Christmas, birthdays etc and when the surviving child/ren reach developmental landmarks or achievements, will be sad and often painful reminders of what could have been for those who did not survive.

These kinds of experiences may play havoc with her emotions and she may need someone to help her through any rough periods. The most helpful thing a friend can do is to LISTEN. Let the mother talk out all her thoughts and feelings without receiving criticism or hearing many stories of other people's losses. This is when she could really benefit from a support group and individual counselling. Friends cannot always do this well.

- **Don't utter clichés**

“You'll get over it”

“They're better off this way”

“You can always have another baby”

“It's a blessing the baby died”

“Maybe you weren't ready for twins”

“Time heals all wounds”

“Be thankful you have one healthy baby”

“Imagine how much harder it would have been...”

Comments such as these are often made to a bereaved parent and are very hurtful, and can make the feelings worse. There is no doubt that it is difficult for someone who has not had a baby die to be able to understand what it is like for the mother or the father. People try to rationalise it so that they don't feel the enormity of the pain or the unfairness of life, which is why they may use a phrase like one of those above. Our society focuses on youth, life and living, and has always found it difficult to cope with the subject of death.

Some people prefer to avoid the issue by not talking about it at all, and don't face it until their loved one dies. While dealing with your own inner feelings, it is hard to be responsive to the needs and feelings of a bereaved mother. Once you acknowledge these fears and beliefs, then you can be supportive. Some people may never be able to do this.

Special support

Today, staff in hospitals are more aware of the special needs of bereaved parents and are able to provide services such as counselling and referral to support organisations such as SIDS or SANDS or The Compassionate Friends (TCF), depending on the nature of the death. This contact is one way to help the families cope with their loss and their grief by sharing with others who have experienced miscarriage, or the death of a baby or child. Multiple birth parents who have experienced the death of a twin, triplet or HOM remain multiple birth families, and it is through the contact with and support of groups like AMBA, who have so much similar experience, empathy and understanding, that the bereaved parents can in time resolve the most painful aspects of their loss.

A support group of bereaved parents within AMBA or one of its member-clubs is a great and beneficial way of helping those parents who have had one or more multiples die, as it is a very difficult type of loss, and special support is needed on the twin or multiple aspects of it.

Don't ignore the mother, because while these outside groups and the support within AMBA can help, each person offering contact and help contributes to the mother and the family.

Below are a few websites of bereavement support organisations:

sidsandkids.org (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome)

sands.org.au (Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Support)

climb-support.org (Centre for Loss In Multiple Birth)

pregnancylossaustralia.org.au (formerly Teddy Love Club)

thecompassionatefriends.org.au

heartfelt.org.au

Reference books:

“Loss of a baby – Understanding maternal grief” (Margaret Nicol)

“Giving sorrow words – How to cope with grief and get on with your life” (Candy Lightner and Nancy Hathaway)



BEREAVEMENT

HELPING THE GRIEVING MOTHER

This leaflet has been prepared by a bereaved multiple birth parent to offer suggestions to answer that question of “*What can I do to help a member / friend who has experienced one or more of her babies dying?*”

It is intended for AMBA clubs and members, and also for others who come in contact with the mother.

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