Duke University Health System
Bereavement

A Father's Grief

One cannot lose someone they love without feeling sad, angry, anxious, or even depressed. When a baby dies everyone involved grieves – fathers as well as mothers. One does NOT have a choice in the matter. The choice however, is HOW one chooses to grieve and what one does with their grief.

Dads often set their own grief aside in order to "take care" of his wife/partner. Therefore, dads are often neglected grievers and when they are flooded with emotions and concerns, it is very difficult for them. Some men may also feel intimidated by the medical institution and/or its staff adding to the feelings of confusion and helplessness.

What thoughts or feelings might I experience?

- One of the more difficult feelings may be that of **anger**. The anger may be:
  - unspoken, but is felt by those around you.
  - directed at their wife/partner, medical people, nurses, clergy, God, or even at themselves.
  - transformed into a form of blaming - blaming others, or even themselves for what has happened.
- It is OK to be angry when your baby has died. It is an unfair and unjust event.
- **Some men may:**
  - Feel helpless because there is nothing they can do to "fix" it or take the pain away.
  - Be surprised by their tears - crying spells in the car, when alone, or at odd times. Do not be alarmed – this is a natural response. Crying does not invalidate manliness, but indicates that you care.
    - Trust yourself and use this behavior as a signal of what you need – i.e. whether it is to think, relax, or talk to someone who understands.
  - Feel left out of the situation:
    - In this culture, men have been taught and are encouraged to be "strong" and not show their feelings openly. You are seen as being "in control" of the situation and your feelings and therefore, not in need of emotional support.
    - People may ask about how your wife/partner is doing – assuming that you are fine or are not willing or able to talk about the loss.

It is important to understand:

- The importance of the event – the baby's death is a shared loss - it is something that happened to both of you. The loss may be the worst thing that your wife/partner has experienced and maybe you too.
- That both you and your wife/partner will grieve – however, the grieving styles may be different. Please remember that there is not a "right" or "wrong" way to grieve.

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- That your wife/partner NEEDS you to be there for her – in so doing you may also be helping yourself. In taking this journey together neither of you will feel all alone.
- Allow your wife/partner to have the feelings she is experiencing – be with her while she cries, sobs, or even screams, as she needs to. It may be comforting to her for you to share your feelings with her.
- Touching and holding each other may be comforting. Holding does not take away the pain but it is a way of being together. Spending "alone time" as a couple together often helps to cope with the outside pressures and demands.
- Listening to each other is very importance. Encourage each other to share her feelings and let her to talk about the baby, as she needs to – doing this may also help you.
- Realize that this journey may take much longer than you think. The grief that comes with the death of a baby can last a long time. Be ready for it and allow yourselves the needed time
- Include your wife/partner in the decision making process. This will lessen your responsibilities as well as preventing potential future problems. Leaving her out of the process is not protecting her and may even prolong her grief.

Helpful Tips

Lighten your work load temporarily (if you are able too) – until after you are more able to cope more effectively

Take some time to think things through

Consider sharing your concerns and thoughts with other fathers who have lost their babies

Let your family know when you need time for yourself

Engage in physical exercise – to release the emotional energy

If you feel angery – get angry at things NOT people

Ask for professional help – if and when you think you need it

Appreciate and respect your feelings – Do not delay or run away from them.

A precious gift for you and your wife/partner is to

Talk about you loss openly and honestly, and take care of each other and yourselves.