

# **Information and support for partners**

There is often the assumption that the birth mother is the primary griever when a couple experiences the death of a baby. Partners are often expected to assume a supportive role without adequate recognition of their own loss. This section is written primarily to support partners, whilst you are having to make difficult and unexpected decisions. For further support, please contact our Bereavement Support Services team, details of which are below.

This section is written for partners, including fathers in same-sex or heterosexual relationships and co-mothers. Adoptive parents might also find it useful.

Many of the other sections contain information that is relevant to both people in the couple. However, this section focusses more specifically on what a partner might need to know and how they might feel. In the case of adoptive parents, their support might be for the birth mother of the child that they are adopting.

## **Practical and emotional support**

As a partner, you might be expected to take the lead role in telling family and friends, liaising with health professionals, making funeral arrangements and supporting the birth mother. This can feel overwhelming, particularly when you are also grieving for your baby. Consider asking for help when you can. You might like to speak with one or two close family members or friends and ask them to tell others. They can also answer questions on your behalf. You may prefer to send an email or text, or put some information on social media to more distant friends and relations, telling them about your baby, what has happened, and how you would like them to make contact and support you in the coming weeks and months.



If your baby died around their due date, people are usually eagerly awaiting your news and are enthusiastic to hear about the baby. If you phone family and friends you could start by saying, "I have some very sad news." This can help set the tone for the conversation and may reduce the number of inappropriate and upsetting questions. You can also set expectations about the length of the conversation, by saying, "I can only talk for a few minutes", at the beginning, which may help you end the call when it feels right for you.

If your baby died in neonatal care, people around you might have known of your baby's health problems, but they may still struggle to find the words.

Your family and friends may just not know what to say to you. As your news will be upsetting to other people, and perhaps even trigger difficult memories of their own, you might feel you want or have to support them, or apologise for upsetting them. It is important to remember that this is your experience of baby loss and you need to receive support at this time rather than provide it to your wider group of family and friends.

Try not to feel that you have to answer everyone's questions. Say only as much as you feel able. Later, you could follow up your calls or texts with emails providing more information and outlining any help you may need. You may want to ask people to help you look

after any other children you have and to support you in carrying out daily activities, such as cleaning and cooking. People are often keen to help and appreciate clear requests and boundaries. For example, you could say, "Please could you bring food around on Thursday and you are welcome to join us," or "If you don't mind, we are not really up to conversation or eating together, but having you bring over a meal would be lovely."



You could also ask people to help you talk with any other children you have about the death of their sibling. There is more information about this in the *Supporting Children* section.

You may want to tell people what you would like them to say on your behalf, including whether and how you want to be contacted in the first few days. For example, you might prefer for people to send cards, texts or emails rather than phone you.

These preferences can be communicated on your behalf. It is possible that you won't know what you need or would like people to say on your behalf. Please contact the Sands Helpline if you would like support thinking things through.

## How people refer to your baby

You might find that the health professionals caring for you, or even some family and friends, use technical definitions when

talking about your baby without realising how these definitions might make you feel. For example, if your baby died at 23 weeks of pregnancy, they might say that you had a “late miscarriage” rather than that your baby died. This could be because the requirements for registration are different, depending on when your baby died. However, it is important that you tell family, friends and professionals what language you prefer. They might know other parents who use different language to describe a loss that occurred at a similar time in pregnancy.

*When people hear the word miscarriage I don't think they realise that we had gone through a traumatic 48 hour labour, held his body, made decisions about his body, and organised our son's funeral. I now describe Altair as having been stillborn as I want people to know that he was born. That he was here.*

Shema

## Individual grief

The stress on couples when a baby dies can be huge. It is very difficult to give support and understanding to someone else when you are so sad and in need of support yourself. Grief is very individual, and the way that it comes and goes means that, often, 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.

Sometimes couples find it hard if their grief patterns do not match and one partner may feel that the other is not grieving as much or in the same way. This can put a strain on your relationship. Some partners put their grief on hold for a while and concentrate on supporting their partner or the birth mother. Their grief may

emerge weeks, or even months, after their baby's death. Some partners may find it hard to open up having kept things in for so long. Sands is here to support you when you feel ready.

Whether your grief is immediate or delayed, there will probably be times when your whole existence seems to be taken up with grief. Because grief can come in waves, you may also find that you can cope well for hours or even days. Some parents feel guilty about this and worry that they are being disloyal to their baby, but this doesn't mean that you have forgotten or no longer care about your baby. It's quite common to have periods of calm and normality between waves of acute sadness.

## Special occasions

Special days such as Mothers' Day, Fathers' Day, and family gatherings are times when parents often feel renewed sadness. Festivals such as Christmas, Diwali, Eid or Hanukkah, where celebrations focus on family, may be hard. The build-up to the anniversary of your baby's death or due date may feel especially painful. You and your partner/family might want to plan a day off together so that you can do something special to remember your baby.





## Baby-related mail

Reminders such as baby-related mail or adverts on social media can also be a source of distress. If, at the start of your pregnancy, you signed up to any baby clubs or for any mailings, you can cancel these subscriptions or ask someone to do this for you. You can also reduce the amount of baby-related mailings by contacting the Baby Mailing Preference Service.

## When couples have separated

Many couples find it helpful to grieve together and to remember their baby as a shared experience. However, if you have separated from your partner during the pregnancy or after your baby died, you may not have the option of sharing your grief with each other.



If you feel able, you could make joint decisions and arrangements and, if you have other children together, working together to support them may also be helpful, so they receive consistent care and information about the baby and what has happened. There is more information on talking to children later in the book on page 51.

Grieving on your own can be especially difficult and you may need additional support from family and friends, or to seek professional support.

You may find that crying and talking about your baby are good ways of releasing feelings and you may want to tell your story over and over again or find it helpful to write down what happened and how you feel day by day. Not being able to share your experience with the other parent of the baby can feel isolating, even if there are other people to support you. Think about how you need to express your grief and what support you might need. Sands can provide you with your own memory box if this is what you would like.

## Talking to others

You may find it helpful to talk to other partners who have had similar experiences, or to an understanding relative or friend. You can also use the Sands Online Community or contact Sands Helpline for information and support. The Helpline can also put you in touch with your nearest Sands support group. There are also football teams in some areas for bereaved fathers and other male family members to get together and express their grief through sport. You can learn more about Sands United at [www.sands.org.uk/sandsunited](http://www.sands.org.uk/sandsunited).

