



# How can I be supportive for bereaved parents?

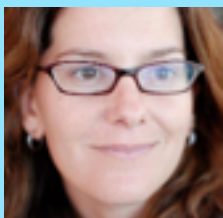
Information and resources for bereaved parents about the option to bring your stillborn or deceased baby home.

Friends and family often feel very helpless and wish they could do more. There's nothing you can say or do that would relieve bereaved parents of all of their pain, but you can demonstrate compassion and offer support in ways that will help bereaved parents to bear their pain as they navigate their grieving journey, but the following suggestions will help you to demonstrate compassion:

- Let them know that you love them and are thinking about them and their baby who died.
- If you feel sad and are also grieving the death of their baby because you had also been eagerly anticipating their baby's arrival, tell them. It is somewhat comforting to know that other people are grieving with you, and many bereaved parents want to hear that others consider their baby's life significant.
- It's fine to say, "I don't know what to say," and it can be helpful if you say, "I wish I could take this pain away". Expressing your grief or feelings of helplessness and your desire to be supportive can be helpful.
- Ask them about their baby, about how they found out about their baby's death, about their baby's delivery, about any time they might have spent together in hospital. If they feel that other people care to hear about their baby, then bereaved parents often love to talk about all the details relating to their baby's death and birth – just like any new parent loves to talk about all the teeny, tiny details relating to their baby.
- Ask the parents if they know about the options available to them after their baby's death. Help them to research their options in respect of seeing, holding or bringing home their baby, collecting any other precious mementoes from the hospital, and/or holding a home funeral. Print out relevant educational pamphlets from our site to share with them: <http://whenyourbabydies.com/q/> and help them to research any state or country-specific legislation. Don't place pressure on them or try to make decisions for them. It's important that bereaved parents make the decisions that feel right for them, and there are no "right" or "wrong" decisions.
- Help bereaved parents to express their wishes to their health professionals, and back them up if they need an advocate to help them to push for their wishes to be respected.
- If the bereaved parents invite you to see or hold their baby, or to visit them at home for a home funeral, realize that it may have taken a lot of courage for them to make that choice, and it is a very special privilege to be invited to such an occasion. If you feel anxious about viewing a stillborn or deceased baby, browse our educational pamphlets to answer your questions and concerns about this practice and to prepare yourself so that you can participate without anxiety: <http://whenyourbabydies.com/q/>. It's important for the parents to feel that anyone seeing or holding their baby is not anxious about it and doesn't judge them as "weird" for making this choice. Feeling judged by family and friends who are important to them can turn the event into a very negative and traumatic experience for bereaved parents. On the other hand, feeling that friends and family are natural and supportive about it can be incredibly comforting and helpful for the bereaved parents, and make it a very special, positive and memorable occasion that helps to set the precedent of grieving in community rather than isolating themselves for the rest of their long grieving journey.
- If, after educating yourself, you still don't feel comfortable to view their baby or you have cultural or religious reasons for choosing not to view their baby, that's okay. Consider whether you'd be comfortable to view a photograph instead, and offer to visit with the family after the funeral.
- As the parents of your own children, if your children have been invited to attend the wake or funeral with you, it's up to you to decide whether to bring them. If you are not anxious about the event, then your children will

take it in as something natural and normal, but if you're anxious, then your children will pick up on your anxiety and may interpret the event as a scary event. Regardless of whether you bring your children to the funeral or wake, if your children were aware of the anticipated baby, then be prepared to talk with them and answer their questions about the baby and about death in general. Encourage them to ask anything they want to ask. Simple, honest, straightforward, drama-free answers are best.

- Don't impose expectations onto bereaved parents for how they "should" grieve. A wide range of reactions and behaviors may be very normal in the grief of bereaved parents, including expressing their grief through tears or talking about their baby. It is also very normal for parents to feel quite proud of their baby, and to see their baby as very beautiful and perfect, even though their baby died or may have had a fetal anomaly. It's also fine if the parents don't cry, or even if they smile or make jokes very soon after their loss. Grief is very diverse, and grieving emotions typically oscillate, with numbness or even quite intense positive emotions coming through in between moments of deep, deep grief. When people feel judged about their natural grief reactions then they may not feel safe to grieve the way they naturally want to, and this can lead to problems in their grieving or social isolation.
- Offer to help with the practicalities of the funeral – whether it's going to be at home, at a funeral home, or in a religious institution.
- Bring their family meals and help look after their other children if they have other children. Help to coordinate a meal roster to enable other family, neighbors and friends to bring coordinate providing meals for a few months. This can be a really big help in the early months of grief, and especially if the mother's physical health was impacted by the pregnancy and delivery, or if they have other children who need to be cared for.
- Don't offer platitudes, try to re-frame the event as a positive thing, or compare their baby's death to something that you think might be worse. This only makes bereaved parents feel that you don't understand the depth of their grief or the significance of their loss, or that you are judging their grief reactions.
- Don't say that that you know how they feel because of a loss you've endured. Each person's loss and grief is unique, and even if it was similar, this doesn't make bereaved parents feel any better.
- Don't offer your religious perspectives, even if you think you know what the parents religious beliefs were before their baby died. Never try to convert a bereaved parent to your religion in the hopes that it would comfort them. The death of a child often challenges parents' spiritual faith or religious beliefs, and it's common for bereaved parents to find themselves questioning all that they had believed when their baby dies. Listen and let them express their big questions and their crises of faith, but trying to direct what they "should" believe can leave them feeling guilty, ashamed and isolated, and may ruin your relationship with them.
- Remember that the empathy and support for bereaved parents often is forgotten within a few weeks or months of their baby's death, but the bereaved parents are only just beginning their grief journey and their more conscious processing of their loss at that stage. That may be when they most appreciate being asked about their baby, having a shoulder to cry on, or receiving a card and flowers.
- Anniversaries and other special dates, such as the date that the baby should have been born, can be especially difficult days. Bereaved parents may especially appreciate your remembering and reaching out on such days.
- Realize that for most parents grieving the death of their baby is a lifelong journey, and they'll need solid, lifelong friends to journey with them, and accept them, however they are changed by the loss of their baby. Don't ever tell them that it's time they "got over it", "got closure" or "let go." This only conveys judgement and can add painful shame on top of their grief.



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For more answers to your questions about bringing stillborn and deceased babies home, go to <http://whenyourbabydies.com/q/>