

How to Comfort Grieving Parents

*Suggestions for Helping Families
Through the Grief of Losing a Baby*



By Kathy Brodock

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What Qualifies Me?

February of 1987 I was 42 weeks pregnant with my first baby, a girl. My husband Jeff and I went to the hospital early in the morning to have labor induced. After realizing she was shoulder fist, we were prepped for a c-section. About the time they were to take her from me I started having trouble breathing and the last thing I remember was a mask coming down on my face. I woke up in recovery with Jeff telling me we had a baby girl but that she had some problems. Between trying to wake up and being nauseated, it was hard to comprehend what he was saying. At this point, all we knew was that she has a cleft lip and cleft palate and that they were preparing her to take her by ambulance to Syracuse Hospital about an hour away. A few hours later, we received the call that she was a very sick baby and that there was no hope for her. She had problems with her heart, lungs and kidneys and that she would not live through the night. We consented to have her baptized. She did live through the night, until the next evening at 6:30.

I never held my baby. The next time I saw her it was a few days later, she was in her casket. Because we lived in New York and she died in February, we had to wait until April to bury her. For me the first year of grief was hard, the second year was even worse. Jeff and I joined a local support group for bereaved parents and became very involved. It was a strange type of comfort to know that we were not alone in our grief, that others were experiencing the same struggles. No one can truly understand unless they have been through it. We later went on to head up a support group for parents that had suffered infant loss. Because of our own experience and helping others through theirs, I feel like I can share a little insight to those that want to help hold the hand of others that are hurting.

*This is dedicated to Mary Nicole Brodock,
February 27-28, 1987,
Whose life was made full and complete according to God's plan.*

*God comforts us not to make us comfortable,
but to enable us to comfort others.*

Grief

Then Jacob tore his clothes,
put on sackcloth and mourned for his son many days.
Genesis 37:34

Grieving is a very unique experience. Everyone deals with the pain in his or her own way. What makes grief even harder to cope with is when others impose 'their' expectations, what they believe to be a proper reaction to situations, or a reasonable amount of time for healing. Grieving is a very personal and individual thing. Everyone deals with his or her pain after death differently. A person will seem to be doing very well and then drop off to being extremely sad or angry, this is normal. There does come a point where outside counseling is helpful, but one must remember that grieving is a very long process, to which there is no quick fix.

Never assume that someone is doing well, especially in the beginning. Shock is God's protection to help them through the first days and weeks. Most people actually feel like they are going through the motions, but they feel little emotion. However, it will come, it will come when they least expect it. There will be long, dark nights and miserable days, this is part of grieving. Even those of us that believe in the Resurrection grieve deeply. Only time and God's mercy will lessen that pain.

Some parents that loose a baby go through serious marital problems during their grieving. This is because they do not really understand that men and women grieve so differently. While we were in the support group, we watched many marriages fall apart. I am so very thankful that God used Nicole's life and death to draw Jeff and I even closer, although we did have some struggles that first year of grieving.



Women will usually spend more time re-living every moment surrounding their child's death. They usually want to talk about it and cry much more often than their husband. Women will spend a lot of time wondering what they could have done differently. Because women are the ones that actually carry the baby, she is more likely to feel responsible, that she could have done something differently.



God has created men to be providers and protectors. They can become frustrated and feel helpless because they want to take care of their wives and there is so little they can do. They want to stop her pain, but they cannot. Men will often throw themselves into their work or a hobby, something that they can control. This also helps to keep their minds and hands busy so they do not have to keep thinking about their loss. Women will assume that he does not grieve as deeply as she does, which is not true, he just grieves differently.

Intimacy can be a serious issue because of the fear of becoming pregnant and losing another child.

What NOT to say



Words are so powerful. When people are hurting they tend to be more sensitive about things that are said or implied. This is why those that are helping the grieving need to be so careful to watch what they say.

It has been 20 years since our daughter died and I still remember some of the hurtful things that were said to me even before my daughter was put in the ground. One relative said, **“Well I think it was a good thing so you could have more time to spend with her (pointing to my stepdaughter).”** Can you imagine the pain and anger? My heart was crushed at losing my first child and this person is sitting there saying it was a “good thing”?!

“Oh... you can always have more children.”

While I was still in the hospital, my daughter was an hour away from me dying, and another relative stood in front of me saying, “Oh you’re young, you can always have more.” **This is one of the most painful things you can say to any grieving parent!** Never minimize the value of a human being, no matter how small.

“It is better to lose them now than later after you were attached to them.”

This was said to me about 5 months after Nicole’s death. We were deep in grief, people expected us to be getting over it. A relative said, **“Just be glad you didn’t have her a long time and get attached to her.”** My reply to him was, “I was attached to her from conception. YOUR daughter, is 30 years old, you have memories and pictures. All I have is a stack of hospital and funeral bills, a dead baby in the ground, and a huge c-section scar. I have lost my future, my dreams.”

“It was probably for the best.” Again, do not try to explain what God has chosen. Obviously, God does know what He is doing, but this comment hurts a grieving parent.

Get over it and move on with life. This is not usually said as much as it is implied.



Do not comment if the parents spend a lot of time at the cemetery. Sometimes this is a quiet, private place to pray, think, and cry. As the months and years go on they will visit the cemetery less, but the first few years it may be comforting for them to go a lot. Remember everyone is different.

Tangible Ways to Show You Care



Send cards or little notes on special occasions, holidays, birthday and death anniversary.

Especially in an age where few people rarely send cards or letters anymore, it is special to get a hand written card or note in your mailbox. It shows someone that they were worth the extra time and effort. Grieving parents have many, many dark days, and a simple “I’m thinking of you” note in the mailbox really does help.

For 18 years, my Great Aunt would send me a Thinking of You card on Nicole’s birthday. This was so incredibly special to me. She never forgot our baby’s birth and death. Then my Aunt had a stroke and was not able to send cards, since then she has passed on. I miss her and I miss getting a card on Nicole’s birthday. No one remembers her birthday now except for Jeff and me.

If possible, send a note on the baby’s due date.

Several weeks after Nicole died we received a letter from a lady that we did not know. Come to find out she was the mother of our neighbor, we had never met her. She wrote a lengthy letter expressing her sympathy and concern for us. She also wrote words of encouragement for our future without minimizing Nicole’s life. I cannot begin to explain to you how this touched our hearts. A woman that did not even know us would take the time to write such a beautiful letter to us. Never underestimate the power of the pen.

Planting a tree or flowering bush is a good way to symbolize that there is hope. Those of us left behind need to continue to live and grow in Lord until it is our time. Having a tree or bush to nurture and care for the first couple of years gives those that are grieving something to do with their hands.

A birthstone ring or pendant is a personal gift that can memorialize the baby’s birthday.

A memorial donation is a special way to turn a painful sad time into helping others.

At our daughter’s funeral, we requested that people not send flowers (I could not stand the thought of a florist making money from her death). Instead, we asked that money be donated to a charity.

My parents bought an infant changing table and donated it to their church in Nicole’s name. This was very meaningful to us.

Bibles are wonderful to give in the memory of any loved one.

Our first Christmas was so hard. The last thing we wanted to do was celebrate anything. Our pain was so deep it was hard to find joy in anything (we were not walking with God at the time). I made a small cross stitch ornament with Nicole's name on it and I placed it front of a pillar candle. Every year we light that candle on Christmas Eve as a remembrance of her. This is not for her sake, but for ours.

Christmas ornaments are a meaningful way to let the parents know you remember their baby. You can make one or buy one and have the baby's name and year engraved on it.

I have a small pink baby sock that I stitched on Nicole's name and year. We hang it on our tree each year.

We have one picture of Nicole at the hospital; it is a very bad picture. We have another picture of her in her casket that my father took. She was dressed in a lovely Christening gown and looked like she was asleep. He took the picture so that the casket was not showing. This may sound morbid, but for parents that are grasping to hold something physical of their child, sometimes this is all you can get. A few years later, we had that picture pencil-sketched and had it framed. This is one of our most treasured possessions.

Those that have experienced a miscarriage do not even have this much.

Imposing Expectations



It is easy to assume how you would respond in certain situations, but it is neither practical nor kind to expect anyone else to respond in the same way. Usually those that give their 'opinion' have not walked in the same shoes. No one knows how he or she would respond unless they have been there. Moreover, even if you have experienced the death of a child that does not mean that others will respond as you did.

While Nicole was at the other hospital dying Jeff wanted to be with me. A couple of my family members insisted that he should go see her before she died, he was resistant. They were finally able to convince him to go. Months later Jeff told me that he was afraid she would die while he was there and that scared him. Some people may think that was selfish on his part and that he should not have responded that way. This is not fair to say because everyone handles death in a different way. God was merciful and allowed Jeff and I to be together when the call came that she had died. This was the beginning of the worse pain we have ever experienced.

Never claim that you really understand, because everyone grieves differently.

Do not put time limits on grieving, trust me, the bereaved parents want the pain to stop, and they want a normal life back. This will take a very long time and expecting them to act normal only makes the grieving process harder and the pain deeper.

For me, the second year after Nicole's death was worse than the first year. During the first year, people are more understanding, but by the second year, they expect you to be over it. They expect you not to be sad, not to talk about it, and just move on with life. However, it is not that easy!

Do not expect those that are grieving to attend family reunions, weddings, holidays, parties or anything like that. Any outing can be very difficult because the parents had planned on being there with their new baby. Remember a part of them has died, a part of what they believed to be their future now will never be.

Be considerate if you are pregnant or have a new baby. No one would wish the pain of losing a child on anyone, but at the same time if you are pregnant or have a newborn, be extra considerate about being around the bereaved parents, especially the mothers. Do not avoid them because that too could hurt them, but just be careful not to be basking in your excitement in front of them. Seeing pregnant women and newborns is the most painful thing for a grieving mother.

Remember the Other Siblings



It is easy to forget that the siblings are grieving also. They were expecting a new brother/sister, a friend, a new playmate. They may need some special time with an adult that they are close to. They may need this time to be able to discuss what they are feeling. Siblings may not want to talk with Mom because it will make her cry again. Dad may unknowingly brush them off because it is too painful for him to talk about it at the time. It would be good to have someone he/she could open up to and talk with, some one to ask questions.

Siblings may just need to get out of the house and go for a day trip and escape the sadness of home.

Have the siblings write a letter to the baby, or color a picture could also help them deal with their grief. These letters or coloring pages could be put away with other things to help document the baby's life.

Siblings, especially young ones, may act out negatively because they too are frustrated and hurting. They want life to get back to normal. They do not realize that this is going to take a long time, and that there will be a new normal.

Remember that Doctors Don't Know Everything

One of the most irritating things my OB said to me while I was still in the hospital was, "Wait 6 months and try again." As if Nicole was a number, a disposable life. My OB never addressed my grief. Here I was with a dead child, a huge scar, milk coming in and she was telling me to try again. I honestly do not think some doctors know how to deal with infant loss. Try to remember this, especially when comforting a grieving mother. She is not only dealing with all of the emotions of loss, but the physical effects also, which include wacky hormones.

Doctors do not always have the answer as to why a baby died. This can cause parents to become frustrated and increase their pain as they grieve. Gently encourage parents to wait on the Lord. If there is a medical problem that can be fixed, then they should seek treatment, but there are times when God chooses to leave it as a mystery and we need to accept it, as hard as that may be.

Be cautious of advice. At the request of our pediatrician, Jeff and I received genetic counseling after we lost Nicole. Their conclusion was that we should be cautious about having more children. They believed that it was our common genes (they did not do blood work) that caused her birth defects. They said that each time I conceived there would be a 1 in 4 chance of a baby having the same problems. They had no proof to back this up it was just their opinion. Personally, I believe it was the birth control pill that I had stopped taking just days before conception. Remind the parents that there is wisdom in the multitude of counselors.



God's Sovereignty

Usually bereaved parents are asking God "why me?" They will wonder why God has chosen them to walk down this dark, painful path. They will wonder why God chooses to give wicked people healthy babies to abuse while He took their little one. Some may even become angry or distant with the Lord. Even those that trust in the Lord with all of their hearts will wonder 'why'.

I felt so cheated when Nicole died. It was about 13 years later that someone explained to me that her life was complete. God had already numbered her days and her purpose was fulfilled. That was hard to come to terms with, mainly because of my lack of knowing God's Word. Once I accepted that her life was complete in Christ, it helped me to see her short life in a new light. Not that I completely understand it, nor that I like it, but that I must simply trust God.

Those that are in the depths of grieving may feel like they are being punished or that God's love for them is not as great as they once thought. These are normal reactions. It is our duty to GENTLY point them to Christ. Remind them during the times when the pain is so deep and nothing makes sense, that God does love them. Remind that there are many things on this side of heaven that we will never understand and at the same time, this is where our faith is proven, our faith in the things unseen. Most of these issues have to be hashed out between them and God, but we can sit quietly by their side, wipe their tears, make them meals, acknowledge their pain, remember the child's life, be understanding and give them time to heal.

Prayer

The most important thing we can do for a grieving family is to pray, pray for grace, that in time God will heal their hearts, not that they will ever forget, but that joy will come in the morning. Ask God to show you what special needs the family may have that you could meet. Acknowledge their pain; acknowledge the life of their baby. Mostly pray that the Great Comforter, the Holy Spirit will bring them peace.

"The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."

Psalm 34:18