

# *Surviving That First Year...and Beyond*

After your baby dies, you may have moments when you doubt that you can survive this ordeal. Your anger, sadness and despair may run so deep that you wonder if you will ever emerge from the abyss called grief. Listed here are 11 ways of coping which in hindsight, many parents point to as keys to surviving their grief – and their baby's death.

- 💖 **Respect your own needs, you may read or hear a lot of advice.** Some suggestions may seem more appropriate than others, depending on your unique situation, your personality and where you are in your grief. Keep what fits and discard what doesn't. Even as you consult the following list, just try those things that feel right for you. No one can tell you how you should feel or what you must do. This you will discover for yourself.
- 💖 **Have realistic expectations for your grief.** Grieving is a process that takes time. Throw deadlines out the window. Recognize that your painful feelings will ebb and flow, and that for awhile, as your shock wears off, you will probably feel worse as time goes on. This can be discouraging, but remember that it is normal and expect this to happen. Just knowing that ups and downs are normal and sometimes unpredictable, can make your journey easier.
- 💖 **Have faith that eventually you will feel better.** Instead of imagining grief as a bottomless pit, imagine a tunnel. When you are in the middle of it, you may not see any light, but as you work through your feelings of yearning, anger, guilt, failure, sadness and hurt, you will come out the other side. Here's another way to think about grief: you must shed a certain number of tears (or feel a certain number of pangs) before you can come to terms with your baby's death. Every time you cry; every time your heart aches; those particular tears or pangs are behind you, and you come closer to healing.
- 💖 **Let your grief flow.** When your feelings are rising, do your best to take the time to honor them. You may be tempted to put off your painful feeling; you may be afraid of being vulnerable or appearing weak and cowardly; you may worry that your feelings will be detrimental to your family; you may fear losing control of your emotions, your mind, and your life. By suppressing feelings, you may think you are controlling your grief, but in reality, you are increasing its power to run your life. Remember that falling apart is temporary and unleashing feelings helps you to regain control over your life. Eventually, you'll be able to function even better for unburdening yourself. By viewing grief this way, you can even consider it the brave, strong, smart thing to do.
- 💖 **Dwell on your baby and your memories.** While you (or many people around you) may believe that the quicker you can forget and move on, the better off you'll be, the fact is, you will benefit from a gradual goodbye. Smoothing your keepsakes and going over memories can comfort you with feelings of your baby's presence. They can also aid you in your grief by helping you get in touch with your deepest feelings of hurt and sadness. In this way, you can truly come to terms with your baby's death and reach a peaceful integration of this experience into your life. If it helps you to talk to your baby's ashes, smell your baby's clothes, cuddle a stuffed animal, sleep with a doll, or cradle pillows in your empty arms do it!
- 💖 **Talk about the baby.** Talk to your partner, to family, to friends, to a therapist, to a support group, in letters, to anyone who'll listen. Telling your baby's story over and over can be tremendously therapeutic. In this same vein, you may find it helpful to keep a journal. By putting your thoughts, feelings, and observations on paper, you can move the pain from inside you to outside, and free yourself from the burden of holding in your feelings. Reading your journal can be a way to affirm your baby and reassuring evidence of your healing.
- 💖 **Accept the support of others, however clumsy it may seem.** Generally, your friends and family mean well and want to be helpful, though they may not know how. You may hear things like "it was only a miscarriage," "you'll be pregnant again soon" or "aren't you over this yet? You hardly know this baby." Do remember that in our society, many people try to ignore, belittle or erase grief in an attempt to "help." In the past, you too may have offered these platitudes, but

now you know how isolating and hurtful they can be. Forgive your friends' ignorance as those before you have forgiven yours. For those people you trust and lean on the most, educate them about what you need. Tell them, write them a note, or give them a bereaved parents' book to read. After all, they want to know how they can be of support to you.



**Pursue those things that help you cope.** Resources may include:

- Talking with your partner, family or friends
- Attending a support group
- Seeing a counselor
- Reading books about coping with grief, personal accounts of loss, or books and articles on medical, ethical or spiritual issues
- Engaging in creative or athletic endeavors
- Leaning on your spiritual or religious faith
- Being open to suggestions from other parents who've been there, using whatever seems helpful and passing by whatever isn't.



**Make a conscious choice to get through your grief without letting it destroy your life.** This can be a significant key to survival. You can decide whether to face or hide from your grief, you can choose whether to triumph over your loss or surrender to it. Many parents mention that eventually they reach a point where they just decide to stop wishing it didn't happen and start learning to live with it. When you are ready, you can do that too.



**Allow yourself to hold onto some hope for the future.** Whether this may include another baby or not, your life can have meaning beyond "bereaved parent." You will always remember your precious baby, and eventually, you can move on in peace, bringing your memories with you.



**Remember, your tears merge with those of other grieving parents, you are not alone.** Respect your own needs. Have realistic expectations for your grief. Have faith that eventually you will feel better. Let your grief flow. Dwell on your baby and your memories. Talk and/or write about your baby. Accept the support of others. Pursue those things that help you cope. Make a conscious choice to survive. Allow yourself to hold onto hope for the future.

**Remember, you are not alone.**

Deborah L Davis, Ph.D

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