

DEATH OF A TWIN - FOR PARENTS

Irish Stillbirth & National Death Society (www.isands.ie)

Having twins is one of life's greatest privileges, yet sadly, some parents have this privilege taken from them. The death of a baby is always a tragedy that is not lessened because you happen to have another baby of the same age. Few people can appreciate this and may unintentionally underestimate your loss.

Being told one of your twins is dead is one of the most heart breaking things you could have to face, whether it happens before, during or after the birth. You will probably feel very confused with so many emotions being experienced all at the same time - joy for your surviving twin and sadness for the twin who has just died.

You will have to make some very important decisions at this time. You will probably want to see, hold and name your baby if you haven't already done so. You may want to give other family members, especially brothers and sisters a chance to see and hold your baby.

Take as many photographs as you can of your twin and if possible of both twins together if you wish. You may also want the blanket that wrapped your baby. Any clothes he/she may have worn, a lock of hair, baby's hospital bracelet, footprints, handprints or your ultrasound pictures if you had a scan. These are all valuable mementos, which may bring comfort to you and help you to remember your baby.

Saying Goodbye

You may find it extremely difficult to come to terms with the fact that funeral arrangements have to be made for your baby while your mind is perhaps concentrated on the health of your other twin. However, think carefully before you allow family and friends to do all the planning for you. Making your own plans is the beginning of saying goodbye. It can be part of your healing process.

There is no need for funeral arrangements to be rushed. A delay of several days between your baby's death and burial service can allow you time to feel physically better and can also help you to face the reality of the death. Remember, this is the only time you will have to spend with him/her so it is very important to take your time and not make rushed decisions. This may not be easy, you may be in the very traumatic situation of having the added worry of the surviving twin not being healthy and perhaps fighting for survival.

In this case, you may find that all your thoughts and energy are put into this baby and there may be a certain amount of suppression of your grief. It may well happen that when this twin is healthy enough to go home that the extent of your loss will have impact upon you.

Caring for a new baby is exhausting and time consuming and you might find that you set aside your sadness for months or even years.

Going Home

Going home from hospital with one baby is perhaps the first time that parents will begin to realize the full extent of what has happened. It can be a lonely mixture of joy and relief and also of intense sadness. It can also be a major step along the way to realizing that indeed one of your twins has died.

You may find it difficult to understand your conflicting emotions - joy and relief at the survival of one twin and a complete sense of sadness and loss of another baby. In addition to your intense grief, you may feel very let down. As a parent expecting twins, you may have been the focus of admiration. Suddenly, this prestige is gone.

It is not only a shock to parents but also to grandparents and other family members. It is also a major disappointment to midwives and doctors who may have been sharing the joy of expecting twins. Many people fail to admit this disappointment. You may feel that they are trying to deny your baby's existence. Well meaning family and friends may tell you that you are lucky to have one baby or perhaps it was for the best. The death of a twin is a tragedy perhaps beyond the understanding of all, except for those parents who have experienced a similar bereavement.

As parents of twins, where one has died, you are facing a multitude of mixed emotions and problems which are traumatic at the time and may seem insurmountable. You are grieving for one baby while trying to carry on as normal for the sake of your other baby. You may think about the twin who has died almost constantly, cry a lot, and wonder what it would have been like if both twins had lived or you may try to deny all that has happened and focus solely on your surviving baby, only to find all your sadness re-surfacing in the future.

Many people are bewildered as to what to say or do. Many may avoid the subject altogether. This is all too easy because there is another baby to discuss and admire. They don't understand that your twins are two separate, unique and loved individuals.

The Future

The conflict of joy and sadness will always be there - it may well lessen as years go by but occasions such as birthdays, anniversaries, first day at school etc. will always be tinged with some sadness for the death of your twin. These are constant reminders, which emphasise your loss.

Also, you do have a constant reminder - your surviving twin. He/she will want to know about the other twin in later years. It will be much easier for your child to accept what has happened if he/she is told about it at an early stage. It is better if he/she is brought up to talk naturally about it and will then feel free to ask questions.

You are likely to be changed in some way by this experience. Even, when you have successfully adjusted to the tragedy, this will not mean that you won't shed any

more tears for your baby or that feelings of disbelief and sadness won't come flooding back from time to time. Your grief is as real as your joy and both need to be understood. The intense pain which you feel will be lessened with the passing of time. You will find that you won't and cannot forget this little person you will always hold dear in your heart.

Margaret:

"I felt a mixture of emotions of sadness, loss and relief, all at the same time.
I could hardly take in what was happening.
I heard myself ask several times, "Is the other baby alright?"

Anne:

"I couldn't put her out of my mind. Thinking, why did it happen?
I should have brought home two babies.
Everytime I looked at Carol-Anne I could see Mary Francis beside her."