Stillbirth: grief and support

This is a transcript of the Raising Children Network video available at http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/stillbirth_grief_support_video.html. In this video, parents of stillborn babies talk about their loss and how they grieved. A maternal and child health nurse and counsellor says people grieve at their own pace, and there isn’t always closure to grief. The experience often puts a strain on relationships. It’s important to be prepared for this, and to share feelings with your partner.

Yasna Blandin de Chalain [maternal and child health nurse, counsellor]: The loss of a baby soon after birth or knowing that your baby has died in utero prior to giving birth is extremely traumatic for the mother and for the entire family. Families will usually describe the loss of a child as being the absolute worst loss of anything they’ve ever experienced in their entire life.

Sally [daughter Hope was stillborn]: I just gave myself over to the grief really. I sort of... that almost became my job. Just to grieve. Like people judge me for that. Like why isn’t she getting back to work and getting back on with her life but I think dealing with it healthily and, you know, back then has probably made it better for me now because I processed it so thoroughly in those first probably eighteen months.

Yasna Blandin de Chalain: There isn’t a timeline for grief. Everybody will grieve at their own particular pace. Generally speaking people will talk about that first year as being the most acute and the most intense time, however grief can sometimes just hit us out of the blue. We think we’re doing really when and then there’ll be a trigger. And we feel like we’ve just gone back twenty steps in the progress that we’ve made.

Gavin [daughter Alexandra was stillborn]: A lot families have broken up because they just can’t... they can’t come to terms with the different levels of grieving. Different ways that they dealt with it. You know, I know there’s sometimes frustration from one partner that one... they consider the other partner dwelling in their grief or relishing their grief in some way.

Yasna Blandin de Chalain: One of the important things I think to really take into consideration is how relationships will change through the grieving process and I think knowing that this might occur is very important because then you can work on it. It’s very rare for relationships not to have some sort of challenge through this period. Being aware that it might happen, being aware of how important it is to actually share it with your partner are really the ingredients I think to being able to move together into a different space in your relationship where it then opens the door perhaps for mutual growth and for better communication all round.

Kelly [daughter Alexandra was stillborn]: I think the grieving really caught up with me about two years later. You know, after we’d had our subsequent baby and the joy of that, of having a live baby after having a baby, you know, that was stillborn. You know, there was the high of that for a long time and then it sort of, you know, crept... crept in
and became a very big... more than grieving, it became a depression I think. About two years afterwards.

Yasna Blandin de Chalain: There really isn’t a quota around grief. It’s about we’ve integrated it into our life now in a way that we can move on with other things in our life whilst still accepting that we have this grief that we’re dealing with too. And that will vary from men to... differences in men and women in terms of how they grieve too. I think sometimes with men they often see themselves as the protectors, the people that need to be strong in these situations and yet they’re very much grieving underneath all of that as well. And it’s like, how do we help men in families grieve in healthy ways too.

Simon [daughter Hope was stillborn]: The one thing that we could have done better, I know I could have done better is probably talk more. I think while Sally was grieving I almost took it upon myself to... I had to get back to work so I had to keep things running. I had to, I guess, be the breadwinner and try and...

Sally: Put on a brave face.

Simon: Yeah. Which was very difficult and I probably did that too much at home. I probably should have I guess spoke about it more because I don’t think I processed anywhere near as well as Sally did.

Kelly: I didn’t leave the house, I drew all the curtains and blinds and...

Gavin: And friends who got it, they kind of just dropped – you know, we call them the UN food drop – just dropped dinners on the front porch.

Kelly: It was beautiful.

Gavin: And a couple of friends just turned up to say 'I’m taking Harry out for a play'. And that’s exactly what you needed.

Simon: Some people were there every day calling or stopping by and then there were others, quite close friends actually that were just not there, that I guess they didn’t know how to deal with it and...

Sally: Their way of responding was to say nothing sort of thing. We lost some very, very close friends but made some really, really good friendships with people that just stepped up. Like people that were more acquaintances in our life just obviously had either known someone it might have happened to and... or just knew the right things to say in a sort of grief situation.

Yasna Blandin de Chalain: People when they’re grieving are not often very good at expressing what their needs are because they’re so overwhelmed with their emotions. So a practical way to support somebody through grief would be to offer the help that might be, you know, useful for them at the time. It might be offering to do things with
other children. It might be cooking meals. It might be looking after children so that the couple have time on their own to actually go out and spend some time together.