



# NORTH FLORIDA WOMEN'S PHYSICIANS

Building healthy relationships.

**Whether your child died early in pregnancy, or just before delivery, you had a baby. You spent many happy moments planning your future together, feeling love, and experiencing an emotional attachment to your child.**

**Your baby's death is a major loss, and you can expect to be in shock for a while. You may feel numb, confused, cheated, and struggle to believe your child's death even happened.**

**It has happened. It is real.**

## Accept Your Pain

Many people will want to hear that you're doing fine, and that things are getting better. Only it doesn't always work this way. You're hurting and although you feel frightened by it, it is important to the healing process that you experience your pain. "Keeping a stiff upper lip" is a destructive waste of time. If you feel angry, let it out: hit a pillow, kick your bed, yell and scream. If you feel depressed, don't be afraid to cry. Crying has its own special way of healing and releasing built up emotions. Feeling your pain is the beginning of the healing process.

Once the healing process is underway, don't be alarmed by recurrent feelings of anger and bouts of tears. Situations arise that will trigger your emotions. The process of healing is not always a smooth progression. You will have good days and bad days. This is all part of the healing process. Although you will always remember, your thoughts will become less painful with time.

## Don't Punish Yourself

Guilt is usually felt more deeply than any other emotion. When something goes wrong, we re-examine ourselves to see what we could have done to change the outcome. Don't punish yourself with "if only's": "if I hadn't worked so hard during those last few weeks." "If I had only taken my vitamins." "If only I hadn't had that drink." "If only I hadn't gone to exercise class." Don't waste your energy on guilt—use it constructively. Talk to your doctor or midwife, air your feelings, and lay your "if only" questions to rest.

## Take Time To Heal

With so many emotions at work, your mind is in intense turmoil. These feelings are all part of the healing process. Pamper yourself: take a leisurely walk; listen to your favorite music. Everything else can wait. The healing process takes time and recovery depends on letting the process happen. Resisting mourning will interfere with your body's natural stages of repair. If you postpone the grieving process, it may return months or even years later. The greater the loss, the more time it will take to heal.

There is one more matter of concern that you should be prepared for after your loss. You can expect coupons for baby food and subscriptions to baby magazines to come in the mail. You may also feel hurt when you receive a baby announcement. When a friend or relative becomes pregnant, you may feel jealous. This is a normal reaction. These things make your hurt re-surface and remind you of your loss. Memories will come drifting back when you least expect them. This doesn't mean that you are sinking back into depression—it's just the ebb and flow of healing and growing. Bear with the feeling; it will pass.

## It's Okay To Need Comforting

It may be helpful to be with others during this difficult time in your lives. Be brave enough to accept understanding and support from your friends, family and co-workers. Feel free to seek help from mental health professionals (we can make recommendations to you if you like), pastoral care, and parent support groups. There are some excellent books available on the subject of losing a child.



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Finally, remember that pain is not a long-term visitor. You are a whole, beautiful person beginning the healing process beneath this outer surface of turmoil. When the pain passes and your emotional wounds are healed, you will be stronger. **You will survive!**

- Grief is not always well understood in our society and mourners are expected to recover quickly. Be gentle with yourself during the many ups and downs.
- The grieving experience is unique to each person, yet there is much you will have in common with others. Guard against putting expectations on your partner and others.
- Tears are healthy and acceptable as you process the pain following the death of your child. Cry freely and do not apologize for tears.
- Grief affects your eating and sleeping habits, your energy level and ability to concentrate. A balanced diet, adequate fluids, moderate physical exercise and rest are especially important during the mourning period. Call your doctor or midwife if you have physical symptoms.
- Alcohol and sedatives can cloud thinking and slow down the bereavement process. Use prescribed medications sparingly and only under supervision.
- Friends and relatives may avoid both you and talking about the death of your child, out of awkwardness and fear that they'll say the wrong thing. Let them know that you need to talk about the baby and that it helps to talk. Share with them as you can.
- Search for listening friends or others with a similar experience to help you through this time.
- Delay major decisions for a while—changing jobs, a new home, or another pregnancy.
- Accept the help of others. Ask people to do specific things for you, such as bringing you food, keeping you company, or caring for your other children.
- Keep the baby's clothes and other things until YOU are ready to decide what you want to do. Time is needed in making a good decision about these things.
- Meaning in life will return in time. The pain does lessen. Talk over your feelings with a trusted friend as they surface.
- Express your guilt feelings and thoughts. Try to share these feelings with someone who will listen and help you to explore and forgive yourself in time. You may want to tell this person, "I need to talk about this and have you just listen".
- Anger is a common and normal response, but perhaps unacceptable to you and difficult for others to witness. Find healthy and safe ways to express anger—ex. beat a pillow.
- Your anger may be directed at God. You may feel that your faith has weakened as you question past strong beliefs. Tell God how you feel and talk with those who can help you explore. Your faith can help you through this time, yet expressing doubts and feelings aids in processing what you are experiencing.
- Include your other children in your grief. Do not hide your tears from them, but be open and honest about your own feelings. They too, are grieving and need an avenue to express their feelings. They need to be included and to feel your love. You may find it helpful to find a close family member who can supply what you are not able to give to your children at this time.
- Holidays and anniversaries are reminders of your empty arms. Plan ahead to avoid some of the added stress. Do not expect others to remember or be sensitive to how you might feel. Lower your expectations of yourself. Take time for your needs.
- Mutual-help groups put you in touch with others who have had a similar experience. By sharing, deeper feelings will surface and can then be processed in an atmosphere of understanding and acceptance. Know that you are not alone. There are others who understand and who care.