

# SEXUAL PROBLEMS FOLLOWING THE DEATH OF A BABY



## SHROPSHIRE

Supporting anyone  
affected by the death of a  
baby

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Sexual problems are difficult to discuss with outsiders at any time but, when they arise as the result of a tragic event such as the loss of a baby through miscarriage or stillbirth, they not only make the grieving parents feel isolated from help but from each other at a time when mutual support is essential.

To compound problems, each partner may be reacting in a very different way from the other and might not be immediately able to understand the other's feelings. Problems in resuming a normal sex life after the loss of a baby do not occur as a matter of course and should be anticipated by grieving parents.

This leaflet aims to reassure parents who are experiencing problems that their experience is not unique, that they are going through a normal consequence of their grief and that they can resolve the problems together. The leaflet deliberately shies away from giving direct advice, as each set of problems is different and each couple has its own way of dealing with them. Instead, it gives many examples of the feelings and problems expressed by couples who have experienced the loss of a baby.

The grief that parents feel following the death of their baby can have a very beneficial effect on their personal relationship. Sex can become an extension of the mutual support and communication between the couple and indicative of their love, affection and support for each other. "When we were making love we did not need any words, we felt as one person. He knew how I felt and I knew what he felt. We know that we still had each other." Even so, the man must be very aware of the feelings of his partner when they first resume love-making. The last thing to be 'inside' her was her baby and this is a memory to which she may want to cling. Her partner's body may seem an 'intrusion' on that. "I wanted him to make love to me, but I was so frightened that I would be hurt, I still feel pregnant in a way; my body still belonged to my baby. It was another step away from the baby and towards recovery. It was some time before I was ready to take that step," Guilt feelings often inhibit one or both partners from enjoying their return to a normal sex life. Love-making begins spontaneously, but one partner may suddenly 'switch off' when overcome by an overwhelming feeling of guilt at the pleasure which he or she is feeling. "I shouldn't be feeling happy. I shouldn't be enjoying myself - my baby is dead." "I couldn't take part in an act that resulted in death."

The other partner may not understand this sudden change in emotion and feel rejected and hurt. Tension mounts and problems can become more exaggerated.

Even after the normal six week, post-natal period, the vagina may still be tender, particularly if delivery was complicated in any way. Both partners may be over-cautious until fear of possible pain during intercourse has been overcome. By taking things very gently and slowly at first, both partners will regain confidence in themselves and each other. "I thought I might hurt her; she still seemed to be tender". "As the weeks went by, it became more difficult to get her to try to make love. In the end I didn't even bother trying." "He does not seem to understand I need sex for reassurance - that I am still desirable as a woman". These are typical of the many small and common problems that can arise. Most of them are resolved easily as grief takes its course and are a normal part of the grief process.

There are some problems, however which last a little longer and are a little more difficult to live through. Some couples find it difficult to re-establish the sexual side of their relationship after a stillbirth, even though they are both very loving towards each other. Some appear to have re-established their love life, only to experience problems many months later. They often fail to understand that their problems stem directly from their grief and their relationship can suffer disastrously as a result.

"It was a long time before I really wanted him again. I used to pretend at first that I was enjoying sex, but then I began to dislike it so much that I could not keep up the pretence. One he knew how I felt he was great. He didn't force things; he just waited until I was ready. We stayed close together and talked a lot about the way I felt. One night, without thinking about it, I suddenly realised that I really needed him to make love to me."

Grief sometimes brings with it some form of depression. Depression brings with it a loss of appetite, fatigue and insomnia as well as known side effects. It can also involve a loss of sex drive. As grief is slowly resolved, the depression lifts and the side effects disappear too. It is quite common for one or both partners to lose interest in sex quite involuntarily.

This can be particularly worrying for the male partner especially if he does not relate his inability to satisfy his partner with his grief.

He becomes more anxious and the problem becomes more acute. By slowly and surely working through their grief the couple will come round to wanting to make love to each other again. The process cannot be hurried or forced and much patience and understanding must be shown by one for the other. Whilst they may not feel able to have full sexual intercourse, there is no need for the couple to feel 'cold' towards each other.

They can still be warm and loving. A full sex life will return in time. "I just didn't want to make love to her. I couldn't. The more I tried the more I failed. I thought I was ill. We talked it through.

She thought that it was probably losing the baby that was worrying me, even after all those months. We decided to give it a rest for a while. It was easier knowing that she understood. One night, quite soon really, without realising it, I wanted and needed her. We went through the occasional rough patch after that but soon the problem disappeared. Since then sex has been better than before, we're closer now than we have ever been."

Some couples have been bewildered to find problems re-occurring several years after their baby has died; once they have completed their family. The 'era of pregnancy and child-rearing' for them is over and the finality which that brings with it, brings back memories of their failed pregnancy.

Most mothers feel the occasional prang of broodiness when they know deep down that their family is complete. For mothers who have experienced a death of a baby, that prang is probably a little more intense and can even re-ignite feeling of grief which were long ago overcome. As time goes by, as parents begin to enjoy their growing family; the memories of their lost baby will diminish once again.

Hand in hand with the subject of sex goes the subject of pregnancy, There lies the root of many of the problems which couples experienced. Either the fear of another pregnancy, or an obsession for another pregnancy can cause such anxieties that sex life suffers and sometimes becomes non-existent.

Firstly let's think about the fear of a future pregnancy. This is a very natural reaction to losing a baby. "If I lost one baby I can lose another." "I couldn't bear to go through all those months of worrying." "I 'm not ready yet. I can't let go of the baby I've lost. Another baby just wouldn't feel the same." Not only the bereaved mother feels this way. "I didn't think that she could cope with another pregnancy, so I kept away from sex as much as possible." I felt so guilty that I had put her through all that pain. I couldn't take that chance again." Hopefully as couples come to terms

with their grief, these problems will resolve themselves. They can, however, go on for some time. Readiness to go ahead with another pregnancy is something which comes to some couples very quickly but others take along time to reach their decision.

It is something which cannot be rushed and there is no golden rule as to the length of time it should take. The obvious solution to the sex problem in the meantime is good family planning advice. Where couples feel able to take advice, a sympathetic doctor at the family planning clinic is the obvious person to seek out. If they can do this together so much the better. It might even take some time before they feel ready to use any form of contraception. This signifies another step back to normality and away from the lost baby. Fears about the success or failure of a future pregnancy are bound to exist and are very real, even if sometimes irrational. The help of a professional in whom the couple trust, can often help to allay those fears, but they are unlikely to disappear completely until a successful pregnancy and delivery is achieved.

Let's think about the problems or failure which can arise for the couple for whom pregnancy becomes an obsession. Soon after losing a baby many couples, and particularly the woman, desperately want another pregnancy. This feeling is often short lived but is a very natural need to replace the baby in the now empty womb. She didn't want her pregnancy to end in the way it did and she yearns to be pregnant again. This is often a yearning for the state of pregnancy and not so much a yearning for another baby. It is a desperate need to replace the lost pregnancy - something which cannot be done. This desperate need usually diminished as the early weeks go by. Sometimes the obsessions live on for a long time and can begin to cause problems with the couple's sex life.

Sex becomes the means to an end, a way of becoming pregnant, a mechanical happening, a baby-making session. It ceases to have any emotional value and can soon give no pleasure to either partner. As a result, one or other partner, usually the male, will begin to lose interest and the couple's sex life diminishes and then ceases to exist. The very pregnancy which both partners so desperately want is so much an obsession that it has killed the sexual relationship it needs to exist. It seems at the time that there is no way out of this vicious circle. Sometimes, the couple may need somebody else to point out to them what is happening and what is probably the cause of their problem. Other couples can talk through the problem themselves and by realising its cause they can find the

solution. This often involves throwing themselves into something totally unrelated - a new job; a project on the house, flat, etc.: a decision to put off another pregnancy for a certain period of time - anything to change circumstances sufficiently to break out of the vicious circle. As time goes by, and it often takes quite a long time, the couple can take a more balanced look at the possibility of another baby and, when they are more relaxed and less anxious, their sex life can gradually resume its former pattern.

Most problems are aggravated by worry. Equally most problems can be helped greatly by talking them through and sharing them until the feeling or the event which brought the problem to the surface is isolated. Sexual problems are most definitely problems which have to be solved by both partners together, so openness, honesty and willingness to discuss any bad feelings as they arise, can often help solve problems, almost before they become problems. Professional help is available though it may take some determination to seek out somebody with whom both partners feel able to discuss very intimate problems.

Acknowledging that problems exist which can't be handled alone is probably the biggest step towards solving them. Most couples feel a certain amount of embarrassment when discussing their sex life with another person but the reassurance they receive that their problem is probably one which many, many couples have solved, is often all that is needed!

### **SOME SIMPLE 'GUIDELINES' TO CONCLUDE**

Take things at your own pace - each couple will learn to cope with their grief at their own pace. You will not be able to rush things along successfully.

Talk out your worries together before they become problems. Often analysing the reasons for your anxiety with your partner will remove the anxiety.

Don't be afraid to ask for help if you need it and before your problem becomes acute.

Sex is our most basic emotional form of communication. Use it wisely to communicate your love and support for your partner