

# Losing your baby

## Perinatal bereavement



**Losing your child before, during, or just after birth is a very difficult ordeal. This fact sheet talks about the emotions you may feel and the phases you may go through, and offers some advice. It is based largely on the experience of parents who have gone through such bereavement.**

### What is perinatal bereavement?

It is the bereavement experienced following the loss of the embryo, fetus, or baby during pregnancy, childbirth, or in the first year after birth.

This bereavement can occur in very different situations: miscarriage, death during pregnancy, at childbirth, or in the following days, termination for various reasons, etc.

### It is normal to feel shock?

Yes. This shock can even be so strong that you feel paralyzed and no longer know what to do. You may also feel disconnected from your body.

Some parents try to escape the reality in different ways. For example, when the child dies in the womb, before it's born, they might want to induce labour right away. Other parents may refuse to believe it, want to leave as quickly as possible, etc. These are normal reactions to a situation that scares us and makes us anxious.

Yet, even if it's difficult, it's better to take some time to think things through and understand what's going on.



### How will the CHUM support me?

The team will be there to support you through the different stages. They will also be able to help you with the decisions you'll have to make. In some cases, and depending on your needs, you may be able to see a psychosocial worker, a psychologist, or a spiritual care worker. You may be followed over the short or medium term.

### What does it mean to "grieve"?

Grief is a normal and universal passage, most often linked to the loss of a loved one. The person who is grieving goes through different emotions. They can occur at the same time or separately.

## What are the different emotions experienced in a bereavement?

Here's what you may feel and how you might get through it:

- > **Shock:** the impression that what's happening is unreal, the feeling that you're still pregnant, difficulty believing you've lost your baby.
- > **Anger:** revolting, crying, screaming, feeling guilty or that you're the victim of an injustice, looking for the cause or someone to blame.
- > **Disorganization:** sadness, emptiness, suffering, loneliness, jealousy, helplessness, nostalgia.
- > **Hopelessness:** awareness of your loss, withdrawal, signs of depression, thoughts of suicide, insomnia, decreased appetite, difficulty concentrating.
- > **Adaptation:** seeking support from family and friends, giving meaning to your loss.

These emotions can be experienced with different intensity and in a different order from one person to another.

It's also possible to move from one phase to another and then go back to a previous phase. For example, a birthday or due date can cause someone to relive a phase of their bereavement. That doesn't mean the bereavement process isn't going well.

## Is perinatal bereavement different from other types of bereavement?

It can be. It's often said that it's an invisible bereavement. The reasons for this are:

- The death of one's child is unthinkable and sometimes remains unexplained.
- There is already an emotional bond with the baby, as this bond is often created before birth.
- There are "parallel losses". There may be a feeling of loss of self-esteem or identity as parents (loss of plans and of a projected future).

- There aren't many concrete memories with the baby, so the loss may seem unreal.
- Friends and family may find it difficult to recognize the grief the parents are experiencing. Usually, they haven't seen the baby and they have no idea of the depth of the bond that already existed with the child. They may also feel uncomfortable talking about this subject with grieving parents.



## How is the couple's relationship affected?

The death of a baby is a major crisis for a couple to go through. Each partner experiences their bereavement in a different way. Men and women also don't have the same way of showing their emotions or the same coping strategies.

This can bring parents closer or further apart. To help your partner, it's important to listen to their emotions and not compare them to yours. You also have to share your own feelings without aggression. Remember, this is a difficult time for both of you.

Here are some potential difficulties:

- misinterpreting the other person's emotions
- being angry with the other parent
- not understanding the other person and having problems communicating
- problems with intimacy and sexual activity

## How might brothers and sisters react?

Children's reactions depend on what they understand about death. It's important to talk with them about the baby's death. You'll need to use words that are appropriate for their age and level.

It can be helpful to give them the choice to participate or not in certain rituals that are appropriate for their age.

Some children may feel guilty about the death. To lessen this feeling, they can be told that no one is responsible for the baby's death and that it was not possible to treat it.

Other children may be afraid of losing their parent or of dying like the baby. You can reassure them by telling them that you're all fine and that you're not going to die for a long time.

## What about the grandparents?

They can be very affected by the loss of a grandchild, but also by seeing their own child go through this ordeal.

They need to find the balance between supporting their child, without being intrusive, and taking care of themselves.



## Are there differences from one culture to another?

Bereavement is universal and is experienced in all cultures. However, the rituals around bereavement vary.

There are some rituals that might help. Think about those that might be important to your family.

## What can I do if the grief becomes too painful?

Each person has to find what can help them get through this ordeal. It could be to surround yourself with loved ones, to confide in someone, to take care of yourself, to perform rituals, to talk with other parents who have already experienced such grief...

Normally, the emotions associated with bereavement become less intense over time. If they don't, if they get worse, or if you get stuck in a phase of grief, you can get help from an outside support.

This can be a psychologist, a parents' association, a support group, a professional who is an expert in perinatal bereavement, etc. It's important not to stay alone.

## How will I go through a new pregnancy?

Pregnancy, in itself, can raise many questions, fears, and uncertainty. In the context of perinatal bereavement, a new pregnancy can bring out or intensify feelings such as:

- > **Anxiety.** Fear of another death, symptoms of anxiety, the need to be careful about everything.
- > **Ambivalence.** Fear of getting attached to the next baby, for fear of losing it, too; fear of forgetting the deceased baby if you're no longer sad; feeling guilty, as if you had decided to replace that lost baby.

It's possible you may relive the emotions of your bereavement, it's normal. Talk to your doctor, who will make sure you're followed in a way that's appropriate for your situation.



## Who can I contact for help or to ask questions?

Don't hesitate to contact your care team. They can help you find the resources to support you.

*The content of this document in no way replaces the recommendations and diagnoses made, or the treatment suggested by your health professional.*



## USEFUL RESOURCES

To find a psychologist:

Ordre des psychologues du Québec

> [ordrepsy.qc.ca/english](http://ordrepsy.qc.ca/english)

Click on "Find help for yourself or a loved one"

Testimonial videos:

Université du Québec en Outaouais  
When the Storm Hits

> [youtube.com/watch?v=r\\_-ibxtXO3g](https://youtube.com/watch?v=r_-ibxtXO3g)

Support, helpline, assistance, etc.:

Association Parents Orphelins

> [parentsorphelins.org/en/](http://parentsorphelins.org/en/)

Myra's Kids Foundation

> [myraskids.ca/en/home](http://myraskids.ca/en/home)

> 438 346-7989

Readings: Pregnancy and Infant Loss Network

Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre (Ontario)

> [pailnetwork.sunnybrook.ca](http://pailnetwork.sunnybrook.ca)

Click on "Families", then on "Resource Library"

Massachusetts General Hospital

> [womensmentalhealth.org/](http://womensmentalhealth.org/)

Type "support for fathers" into the search bar.

Click on "Resources: Support for Fathers After Pregnancy Loss"

Other health sheets published by the CHUM are available. Ask for those that might fit your situation.



You can also find them on our website

[chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante](http://chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante)

To find out more about the Centre hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal  
[chumontreal.qc.ca](http://chumontreal.qc.ca)