

A`Z How to help after the loss of a baby...

A - Acknowledge the baby.

Don't pretend the child didn't exist. Don't think that because they are no longer here that they do not count. They do. And they always will. Use the baby's name in conversation and don't be afraid to mention them "in case it makes the parents sad"...they are already sad! Knowing you acknowledge their baby is likely to bring a smile to their face. And don't be afraid to ask about the baby. Ask who they looked liked, what the birth was like (if this is appropriate for your level of friendship), what memories they have with their child.

B - Be there for your friends.

Please, whatever you do, don't avoid your friends. Be there for them, whatever that looks like. One thing I really appreciated was getting text messages every few days from a friend, or cards every week or two in the mail from a family member. There was no pressure from them to have to talk, or to be ok to go out. Whatever your friend needs, be there.

C - Cook a meal.

It is very hard to remember to do the basic things when in the initial stages of grief. The sadness is so overwhelming that often the parents won't remember that they need to eat until they are desperately hungry. The motivation to cook can also disappear. As such, it is exceptionally handy to have some meals ready to heat and eat. A few practical tips: keep the food simple (no spicy curries!) unless you know what they like, consider using disposable containers so the parents don't have to think about returning dishes, and be willing to drop the food off and go (don't expect or force a long conversation).

D - Don't give platitudes.

Sayings like *she's in a better place*, *God needed him up there* or *everything happens for a reason* are not that helpful. I think my arms would have been a perfectly good place for Ariella, what "need" does God have for my baby up there, and I don't care if there is a reason, it still hurt! I personally dislike the phrase *your baby was too beautiful for this earth*. Some parents find great comfort in it; I do not. Sure, Ariella is beautiful and she isn't on this earth anymore. But does that make the opposite true, that any future children who live are too ugly to go to Heaven straight away? No. Perhaps you would like me to say *I'm sorry your newborn was just ugly enough to stay on earth*. I don't think so. So please, don't give platitudes unless you know the parent will appreciate them. And remember, no little phrase will take the pain away.

E - Expect nothing = don't have assumptions.

I found it so frustrating when people *expected* me to feel or behave a certain way. If people assumed I was going to be upset on a particular day, it would make me feel guilty if I wasn't. Every person will grieve in their own way and every parent has the right to determine for themselves how they feel or behave. Please don't have (or especially convey) any expectations of grieving parents. Allow them to be sad. Allow them to be happy. Allow them the freedom to express their grief however that may be.

F - Flexible.

Losing a baby turns the parents whole lives upside-down. It's hard to commit to things, so be flexible with your friends. Please don't expect them to commit to events or get offended if they don't turn up to something. Please be flexible with them.

G - Give financially.

This is more applicable for a mid to late term loss, rather than an early miscarriage. Once the baby reaches 20 weeks gestation, Australian law states that the child must receive a proper burial or cremation, which can be costly to the family. The parents will probably be taking time off work too, which

can add to the financial pressure (although they may wish to cover these costs themselves). We found it so lovely to not have to worry about money for a few weeks, thanks to some very generous gifts from friends. Obviously not everyone can give financially, and there should never be pressure for you to do so.

H - Hug them if appropriate.

A lot of people use hugs to offer comfort, and that's great. But be appropriate - not everyone enjoys hugs from people they don't know very well! If you don't know the parents well, ask before giving them a hug.

I - Invite them to spend time with you.

This one will depend on your friends. Some people will desperately want to be around people, while others will value their privacy more than ever. You will know what type your friends are; the most important thing is that you are there for them, in whatever way is best.

J - Joyful news can be shared, but sensitively.

Even though your friend's baby has died, chances are they will still want to hear any joyful news of yours. But please be sensitive - don't tell them something exciting if they are in the middle of crying! Also, if your news has to do with a baby, please think carefully about how to tell them. Some friends of ours had a baby a few days after Ariella was born, and they thoughtfully sent us a message before they announced it on Facebook. This meant that we didn't come across baby pictures unexpectedly and had the chance to hide this friend's pictures if we wanted to.

K - Keep in contact.

I know baby loss can be an awkward topic, but please, stay in contact with your friends. I had some people who dropped almost all contact after finding out about Ariella's birth, and that was really hard to deal with. Even if all you can manage is "hello", say that. Don't say nothing. Please.

L - Laugh when they laugh.

Essentially what I want to say is this: one of the best ways to help is to not try to cheer your friend up when they are sad or make them feel guilty for being happy. If they are happy, then join them in that. If they are upset, cry with them. Let them know you miss their child too.

M - Miscarriage counts.

Acknowledge that it's a real loss. It is. Don't minimise it; don't say "at least you know you can get pregnant." Acknowledge that they have lost a child.

N - Newborns are hard to be around.

If you have a newborn and your friend has lost a baby, don't expect anything (good or bad) from them. The parents may want to see and hold your child, or they may have decided that they won't hold a newborn until they have another baby themselves. Personally, I struggle a lot seeing newborns and have no desire to hold one. Other friends of mine have gone to visit newborns and have even held them. There is no rule about how bereaved parents will react to your baby, so please be gentle and don't get offended if they don't want to see your baby.

O - Offer a listening ear.

Sometimes the most important thing is just to listen. Not offering advice. Not trying to make the parents feel happy/better. Just listen.

P - Patient.

Be patient with your friends; give them time to grieve and don't expect them to be the same people they

were before. It's likely that they will never be the same, and that's ok. A large part of their heart is missing, and the last thing they need is people impatiently expecting them to be "back to normal" sometime.

Q - Questions are better than statements.

I mentioned above (under "expect nothing") that assumptions aren't helpful at all. And statements often assume something. "You must be so sad every day" is an assumption that leaves little room for the parents to be honest, and it can make them feel guilty if they have actually felt some joy that day. It's better to ask a question about how they are feeling than to assume you know.

R - Recognise differences.

Recognise that every person is different; every loss is different. What has helped me may not help someone else. On the flip-side, what has been hurtful to one parent will often be hurtful to another; no one wants to hear that "their baby wasn't a real person" (oh yes, I've heard of that happening!). Take the time to think about what your friend needs, and do that. There is no one-size-fits-all answer.

S - Shop for them.

I found it so difficult to go to the shops after Ariella was born. Firstly, there would always be babies around, a constant reminder of what I no longer had. And secondly, I was scared I would bump into someone I knew but didn't have the capacity to talk to at that moment. Some friends got together to get us a box of fresh fruit and veggies delivered for five weeks, and it was a wonderful gift. It meant that not only did we not have to face going to the shops, but we didn't have to remember to buy fruit and veggies.

T - Time does not heal.

Time may dampen the grief, but I don't think it will heal. I'm only six months down the track, but I've heard this from people much further along. So please don't expect the parents to be better just because it's six months, one year or ten years down the track.

U - Understanding.

Please be understanding, but don't say "I understand *exactly* how you feel" because you don't. Even if you yourself have had a child die, the circumstances would have been different, and all people react to things differently. Even my husband doesn't understand *exactly* how I feel, nor I do understand *exactly* his grief. Don't try to make their grief fit your experience, but let them share how they are grieving, and try to understand.

V - Volunteer specific help.

In the midst of grief, it's very hard to think about what you need. So when someone says "let me know if I can do anything" it's difficult to come up with an answer! If you can cook, offer a meal (and perhaps offer to store it in your freezer until it is needed). Offer to clean, do dishes, pick up groceries, anything! Just don't be offended if the answer is no. And please, keep asking. So many people offer in the first weeks (when parents are so overwhelmed that they don't know what they need), but by the time parents can think of what they need, there's few offers of help.

W - Write a letter or card.

Texts, emails and Facebook messages are great, but they don't last. A card or letter is something tangible, something that will last and something that can be read whenever, without needing to scroll back through a history of conversation. I currently have a handmade card I received from some friends for Mothers Day still on display in our lounge room and another card in my car so that I smile when I hop into the car and see it. Plus I know exactly where all the other cards are and have picked them up multiple times to read. A physical note, letter or card can become treasured.

X - I don't know what to say.

I have to admit, I really couldn't think of something to say for the letter X. Which just made me think, it's perfectly ok to tell a bereaved parent that you don't know what to say. It's better to acknowledge that rather than say nothing at all.

Y - You can say congratulations.

One of the hard things in the first few weeks after Ariella's birth was that very few people actually congratulated us on our little girl. For example, consider sending a baby card instead of a sympathy card. For more of my thoughts on this, read my post about it [here](#).

Z - Zonked.

The parents are likely to be exhausted, so please be aware of that. If the mother has given birth, that is tiring, and the body takes a while to fully recover, even if it was an "easy, natural" delivery! Probably more so if there was surgery involved. It's likely that the father has to do more around the house because of the mum's physical limitations. On top of all of this, both parents are dealing with the grief over their child's death. Grief is exceptionally tiring! Both parents are likely to feel zonked, so please allow them space and time to regain energy.