

*the next
r u n g*

J A C K E E A S H W I N

“I’m sorry your baby was stillborn” are not the words you plan to hear when you are woken from an emergency caesarean...



The world as you know it has just changed forever, the black pit of hollowness opens, and you fall in, not feet first, nor head first, soul first into the dismal abyss of grief.

You cannot hear the words of comfort from visitors to your hospital room, you hear only the stillness of your heart and sensation of emptiness within a womb that until yesterday was filled with an extra heartbeat, kicking legs and moving arms. The baby you have talked to, sung to and read to for at least thirty-six weeks is gone, vanished forever.

The realistic dreams you had of placing your baby into the newly furnished room, created with the softest of colours that envelopes harmony, safety and love, are shattered. The small sanctuary created to nurture the newcomer to the family is now a room of vast emptiness that rips the maternal cord to shreds, as you stand at the open door staring at the unfilled crib. The tears flow as you hold on dearly to the precious memories of your baby’s movements, willing the memory to stay in the front of your mind, fearful they too will be lost to you forever.

In the initial weeks it is hard to put reason to life, the point of being on earth without your baby, the feeling of ‘why me’, ‘why us’ are the only thoughts that come to mind. Added to that is the raw emotion of failure, failure as a mother, failure as a wife and failure as a family member.

Blame upon yourself is so strong that you have no reasoning to doubt otherwise, looking for answers and reasons becomes your hidden agenda, do you turn to religion, do you undertake counselling, do you just move on or do you stand up and accept the hand that was dealt.

Stillbirth is not something that you forget, it is not something you want to forget, it is not something that makes you stronger for having experienced it - **stillbirth is traumatic** – stillbirth is still a birth! Stillbirth is also a death. You are a parent, you are a mum, and you are a dad without a living baby. The stillness that surrounds you is unbearable and you are not attuned to life that is still going on around you. You feel detached and alone, marooned on an island, stopped at the doorstep of life! How do you find your way back?

Together and perhaps with the help of this booklet, hope is available, enabling you to move through each day knowing you are not alone. The stairway out is very steep, and yields many barbs along the way, some days the next rung is already cracked so staying where you are seeming the safer option. The top of the grief ladder is not something that comes with force; there is nothing systematic to follow; only your willingness to open a vulnerable heart and mind will take you to find the next rung.

Research into this tragedy is very slow but research is being done and answers will be found. Groups such as SANDS Australia have opened in each state, along with the fantastic work of The Stillbirth Foundation of Australia. These networks are at the forefront for parents seeking guidance and support through all stages of the ongoing grief that comes with such wretched circumstances.

Six babies a day in Australia are born sleeping, already nestled in the arms of angels, far too precious for earth. Additionally, six mums and six dads go home alone to grieve, seeking answers, attempting to climb slowly upwards, day by day out of that dismal black hole.

<http://stillbirthfoundation.org.au/research/>

Coming to Terms with Grief

*noun: **grief** (intense sorrow, especially caused by someone's death)*

Grief is the harshest of emotions, and in experiencing a stillbirth absolutely nothing prepares you for the intense sorrow that will consume your being. Your emotions that were at an all-time high before the birth suddenly are smashed to the ground. And you are brought to a standstill. Your heart is broken, and you see no reason to go on. You have all the after effects from having your baby, engorged breasts, the soreness of the birth and a menstrual bleed that goes on for days, but the cradle is empty!

You and your partner are not alone in your sorrow, you are not unique, sadly as I have said - in Australia alone, six of these traumas occur daily.

These feelings of sadness and failure overrule your world. The moment when told your baby is still born, life becomes a blur, escalating to an all-time high when returning home to an empty house. Waves of grief, at times uncontrollable, sorrow will descend when you least expect it, in the supermarket, buying a new dress, a shirt or just sitting alone having a coffee. Be prepared also, that emotional heartache stays forever, when anniversaries, birthdays,

days of normal celebration and they appear every year as a constant reminder of your loss.

Grief is never the same for two people; everybody deals with trauma in their own way!

This statement alone is something that you need to understand. Family members may be telling you to move on, get up, get going - but it comes down to your own mind, your own inner self as to how each of us deal with loss, nobody can make that decision for you. Stillbirth in some families and cultures is the 'last taboo' – i.e. it is not talked about and certainly never discussed, sadly this may add to a parent's sense of failure and unworthiness. In stating this also, remember that some family members and friends are fearful of discussing the still birth with you for the distress of sending you into a meltdown. Inside, they too are feeling your pain but are unsure of the best way to show you.

As well as dealing with grief, be prepared and aware of other triggers that you will face daily - a new mother pushing a pram, Mother's Day, Christmas and your own siblings who either are pregnant or who have welcomed a healthy child to the fold. Not only can these triggers be overwhelmingly sad, you may also experience a form of anger –another emotion to deal with in an already stretched psyche.

Research also shows that women who experience stillbirth maybe more susceptible to lower self-esteem in the years following the trauma. There is sadly also a statistical higher rate of divorce for parents of an only child lost to stillbirth. Causes are unclear, but this may be due to lack of communication, sense of failure, and of

course guilt and low self-esteem borne by the mother. It is by no means easier either for parents who experience still birth and already have other living children, they not only have each other to think about, they face the grim realisation of having to relay events of the stillbirth to siblings who, until you went to hospital for delivery, were excited about becoming a brother or a sister.



The First Rung is Day One

The step up is a hard one to make, the dark dismal abyss – the abyss being that you have just been told your baby was born still. You are motionless in hospital with caring nurses and dedicated doctors. This next step is the hardest thing you will ever do

The first rung of coping and ensuring beautiful memories of your baby is to contemplate a few suggestions that research has, over many years, proven to help you through this tragedy.

You have such minimal time after the birth of your still born baby to create beautiful memories if you wish to do so. If the decision is made then I suggest it is crucial to use that time to make remembrances. Consider doing some or all the following as a memento.

-  Take beautiful photos with as many family members as possible with your baby
-  Hold your baby yourself and have photos taken
-  Make a plaster mould of hands and feet.

If your baby was born with hair, maybe take a lock as a memento. I have also known people to encase the lock of hair in a small unbreakable vial.

From day one, if you have decided to create a Memento Box, suggestions for inclusion would be the birth certificate, all the papers from the hospital, the photos you have taken, the hand and feet casts. Perhaps add to the Memento Box every year with cherubs and angels to hang from the Christmas tree, a birthday card, anything that helps you through the dark days.

When you return home, perhaps also plant a remembrance tree and commence a daily journal adding your fears, thoughts, melt downs and in time your positive thoughts.

By doing some or all the suggestions above, you have made it just to the first rung. As you can see in the picture, once you get there just stay and sit for a while. The wider board is there for you to take a well-deserved break on the road to coping. A break to contemplate.

There is no time limit on how long you may want to stay on the first rung; it can be days, weeks or even months. Only you can decide when to reach for rung two.

While you sit there though, food for thought is understanding the stages of grief after still birth. It goes a long in helping you cope. Perhaps staying on this rung for a while will alleviate unnecessary pain of being forced to forget, forced to move on. This step is also the time to come to terms with some of the emotions you are feeling.

Below on the links is reading to help you in your search for peace.

<https://www.livestrong.com/article/229120-normal-grieving-for-a-stillborn-baby/>

https://community.babycenter.com/post/a23867537/7_stages_of_grief

and ..

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4299465/>

 *The Second Rung – Just moving*



Learning to live without your baby is not easy, your arms will ache to hold them, your heart is breaking, your mind is dull.

This second rung is just putting one foot in front of the other, small deliberate steps that carry you closer to an inner calm, the realisation that each morning a new day arrives. A new day that if you allow, will swallow your energy and your reason to move. But move you must, just tiny steps, one foot in front of the other just to stay on this second rung.

The second rung is also about understanding your feelings, being able to put each emotion into perspective, allowing the grief to overflow and certainly not suppressing the overwhelming need to shed tears. Each time you go to the empty bedroom, the same bedroom where as a family you prepared for the arrival, where so many dreams were made, when you enter your heart will break a little more. And it should, this is normal for any grieving process.

Returning home and dealing with removing baby clothes and effects from the prepared room, your mind is saying no, your heart is saying no but deep down you know emptying the room is something that just needs to happen.

Consideration should also be given to seeking crucial time with a good Counsellor, professional support that creates a safety net to catch you on bad days. As you have no doubt found out, family aren't always willing to sit and talk with you and just talking about

your baby is a huge step in your ability to deal with the new world. Counsellors are there for this very reason, seek their help, they are willing to listen. They are there to help.

Perhaps now is also the time to consider joining a group of ‘still birth parents’, each state in Australia have some very supportive groups who are there to support you, hear your thoughts, to help you understand and mentor you through the dark days.

As mentioned SANDs Australia have divisions in each state, Stillbirth Foundation Australia who are in Sydney are great sources of help and assistance.

<http://www.sands.org.au/> , and for support information and contact

<http://www.sands.org.au/find-support>



<http://stillbirthfoundation.org.au/>

The Third Rung – Talking Openly



The ability to talk openly and candidly with family and friends does not come easy but it is a step that will help immensely over time, and each time you do so will be easier.

Use your babies name when you do speak and as previously mentioned, family will be reluctant to engage ineptly for fear of upsetting you for fear of opening the flood gates again.

Understanding this non-narrative from family and certainly more so from close friends is done so out of love and a huge fear of hurting you, but your role in this is to continue to push for conversation, because each conversation you have makes the grieving a little easier. It instils that you are not on your own, your need to share your experience, hurt and heartbreak is also helping you mend.

My grief became very deep seated, which in hindsight, was a tragic mistake. I thought that not talking about the loss of my son would make it easier to forget, how very wrong I was. Like most families, mine were exceptionally reluctant to talk to me, certainly my mother and father never spoke to me about my stillbirth and perhaps the only conversation I ever had was with a couple of friends who came to see me during the early days.

I never sought counselling either, perhaps back in 1983 the thought of going to counselling was likened to going to see a 'shrink' and the view in that era was that only the mentally deranged visited one

of those. I came from a family of ‘just get on with it, it happens for a reason!’

Thankfully though today, Counsellors have come to the rescue for many parents who have had to deal with the loss of a baby.

The ability to talk to others outside family certainly eases the pain and even more so when you join a group of supporters, you come to realise that you are not alone in the world, that in fact the loss of a baby at birth is a sad reality across the globe.

You and your partner unfortunately have just joined the long list of bereaved parents.

The Fourth Rung – Returning to Work



Apart from the day you faced losing your baby, returning to work and facing colleagues is one of the hardest times you will face on your road to dealing with your stillbirth.

Some colleagues will want to hug you, and with each hug your tears will flow, others will avoid you and avoid looking at you. Don't take this as a mean reaction, they are avoiding the hard conversation therefore avoiding the inevitable outcome.

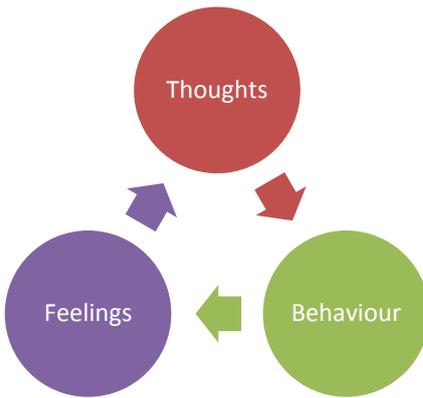
People, and I mean all people, deal with grief in many ways. My own experience was to hold it all within, therefore both work buddies and colleagues never broached the subject and life just went on. But as mentioned, the price I paid was elongated grieving, deeper set because I unwittingly thought that was the easy way out for all.

To this end and my strongest advice is to tackle the hard conversations as soon as you can and especially with colleagues who work with you and perhaps had worked with you during the early stages of your pregnancy.

Talking heals, talking helps, but step one must come from you, confront the sorrow and make others in your presence know that you are open to conversation and even more so are desperate to talk about your loss.

Again, stillbirth is still a birth, you were pregnant, you went through nine months with a child within, shunning conversation will not heal wounds.

The Cognitive Triangle



The Cognitive triangle is a diagram that depicts how our thoughts, emotions and behaviours are all interconnected with each other, and influence one another. Therefore, you can change, or at least influence, one by changing another

🦋 The Next Rung – *The Never-Ending Rung - Living and Remembering*



As days, weeks, months and years roll on, the initial soul-destroying grief dissipates but never completely leaves you. Over time you will come to terms with the loss of your baby but within your heart a sadness and emptiness will always remain and so it should. You carried a baby and gave birth to a baby, but your arms remained empty.

Look at the mementos on bad days and as you build the mementos, you build your

strength.

The rungs to ‘moving-on’ can be exceptionally precipitous, they are connected to the ladder of life. At times during your ‘living with stillbirth journey’ perhaps you will just want to let go and slide all the way down to that safe seat at rung one, it is where the wide plank was - where your world stood still, your safety net.

In your heart you remember when you reached that rung you could just sit and stay forever, give in to drowning in grief for a little life lost. You saw no reason to move but you did, and you have climbed higher and made it to a much greater rung.

So, hold on and push on - because to go back down the abyss to that wide rung will be difficult - you must remember the struggle you have had along the way to reach the new height, the climb back to where you are right now may not be easy one.

For us who have been *dealt the hand of no choice*, we must also realise that no matter how many days, weeks or years, we will never ever reach the top of the ladder, our journey through life without our baby will always be one of emptiness, a hollowness and void that can never be filled.

But, what we do have though is beautiful memories, we have mementos, we have a beautiful angel watching over us and with us each day. Know they are beside you.

I have written this booklet hoping it may help you come to terms with your loss, it is meant as a little “go to” for you to know that you are not alone in your grieving journey. You can reach out for help from others and as mentioned, The Stillbirth Foundation of Australia is available for you, be it somebody to talk to and listen to you as you take each rung in your journey to coming to terms with your loss.

Stillbirth is still a birth.



A moment in my arms, a lifetime in my heart.

www.jackeeashwin.com

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