

WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP?

Friends and family always feel at a loss when someone near to them loses a baby. It does not matter if it is a miscarriage (conception to 18 weeks gestation); stillbirth (19 weeks to term—when a baby dies within the womb); or an early infant loss (22 weeks to term—when a baby is born alive but does not survive past their first year of life); your friend or loved one needs your encouragement and support. And out of your great love for them, you will want practical ideas on how to meet their needs.

As one who has walked the road on both sides, I felt it important to offer suggestions to the person desiring to help one through the valley of the shadow of death. I pray this information will be a blessing to you and help as you minister to the one nearest you that is hurting.

First, you need to understand where your loved one is coming from. Know how old her baby was. Know that at times it is more difficult to deal with the loss of a child at any stage, then with the loss of an elderly grandparent. With a grandparent, this friend has built lifelong memories she will cherish forever; but with her babe in the womb, or tiny newborn, or infant, she only has plans and hopes for a future that will never be.

She will grieve over the “what ifs,” and “what would have beens.” She will have most likely made plans for her baby at differing ages and will now have to wonder what he or she would have looked like. How he or she may have sounded. What silly things he or she would have done. How he or she may have responded to others.

She may have already purchased or been given items to welcome the baby during her pregnancy. Little articles of clothing, a baby book, a special toy, or even may have had a shower receiving many gifts for her little one. These things will make the loss even more difficult and you will need to know how to handle these things as well.

First, you must realize that no one responds the same with such a loss, even if their circumstances appear identical, the responses will almost always be different. **NEVER** compare her to someone else or encourage her to be like someone else. It is always best to encourage her to rely upon the Lord, then her husband, her family, and so on. Pray for her daily that she will be strengthened and will be encouraged by a God that loves her enough to have sent His Son to die on the cross for her!

Second, do not shy away from asking her how she is doing. In fact, encourage her to share what she is comfortable sharing. Many women going through this trial need to talk about the details. Through talking they are able to verbalize their love, their hopes, their dreams, their disappointments, their fears, and all the other emotions and struggles that follow along. If she feels like being quiet, just sit quietly with her while you pray. If she needs to talk, LISTEN. Do not feel the need to talk or share a story you think may relate. Even if you have walked this road too—**NEVER** compare yourself or your situation to hers. If she makes the comparison it is different, but if you had an early miscarriage at 9 weeks, and she is battling an early infant loss at 34 weeks, she may not feel like you have any clue of what she is going through and it could even upset her. This works in the opposite direction as well—if you lost a child at age 5 and she lost a baby at 36 weeks, she may feel you are only saying you understand to make her feel better and she will not relate the two incidences at all. If SHE says that you understand her loss, then sympathize, but women in this trial often have difficulties relating and can be easily upset by someone saying, “I know how you feel.” Even if you do know how she feels, let this comment go.

Third, don't feel the need to “fix” her. Her grieving is going to take time. For some it appears quicker, but don't be deceived. It can come and go like the changes in the wind. For some it may seem an eternity. Your goal is to encourage her to turn her cares and burdens to the Lord and to let you, as her loved one, lift her up. Don't try and force her out of her grief by pushing her too hard. It is ok to suggest outings, or fun things to do, but remember that she may feel guilty laughing or having fun at first. The things that are taking place within her body and her heart will confuse her. Just be patient! Also be mindful not to make comments that would allude to her that you feel she is not handling things well. She may think and even feel that she is doing much better and your comment, although well meaning, may set her back miles. Her progress may be measured in her mind in millimeters. Try to notice every little baby step. Try to encourage her to keep up the good work—even if in your mind, she is not making much progress at all. Your goal must be to encourage and edify. She will need this more than you will ever know!

Fourth, in addition to your emotional and prayer support, offer her practical help. You can either do this all yourself, or organize a group of women from church or the neighborhood, or from within your family. As you organize these women, help them to remember her needs and encourage them to come with the mindset of working and not necessarily in seeing your loved one. Help her make a list of jobs in the house. Cleaning the kitchen and refrigerator, washing laundry, cleaning bathrooms, vacuuming, washing windows, dusting and washing baseboards and walls, etc. If she has other children, people could take turns watching them, not necessarily taking them away from the home (unless this is what she

wants) but in coming in and reading to them, and ministering to their hearts as this will be difficult for them as well. (Often, the mom will not feel like being with her other children, but will not want them to leave her house either—this is why we mention having people come in). Leave the list on the refrigerator and have women check off when a job is completed. Bringing meals is another excellent way for women to help out in a time such as this.

Fifth, ask her if it would be a help to contact others to let them know of her loss. Often one of the hardest things to handle is the person who does not know of the loss asking, innocently enough, “When is your baby due?” Or asking, “What did you have?” Some will prefer to contact the people they are closest to, but would like someone else to help contact acquaintances for them. Make a list of those people, such as neighbors, church members, her older children’s school teachers or daycare providers, long distance friends, etc. It will be virtually impossible to reach everyone who knows, but it will be very helpful to share with as many as possible so they will be tender and not say something to trigger hard emotions when they run into her later. You may find making phone calls, or a trip to a school, or even using email helpful in getting the word out.

Finally, guard your loved one. So often people say silly and uninformed things. I strongly urge you to educate other friends, family, and church members after such a loss. You may want to organize a meeting with people that will most likely come in contact with her and help them to understand the heart of the matter. There are certain things one should **NEVER** say to a woman who is walking through this valley:

- **NEVER** tell her that she can always have more children. Only God knows how many children anyone will have and that statement can give false hope. Plus, no other child will take the place of the one that has died.
- **NEVER** tell her (if she does not have any other children) that at least this is proof that she can get pregnant. Although this may technically be true—she may never conceive again. And this type of a statement will never make her feel better.
- **NEVER** tell her (if she has other children) that she already has been blessed and should just be thankful for them. It does not matter if she has one or 14 others, this baby lost will be devastating to her. Her grief does not mean she is not thankful for the ones she already has, she is just sad over the one she has now lost.
- **NEVER** tell her (if she is carrying multiples) that she may have multiples again, or that God must have known she could not have handled more than one at a time. And **NEVER** say that having more than one would be hard and that she should be thankful this happened (whether she lost only one of the babies or both) because it could have been too hard on her to have had to take care of them. These types of statements are wicked and although I am certain the person thinking them or saying them is probably not, words such as these should **NEVER** be uttered. Having a baby or babies die from a multiple pregnancy is at times even more devastating because even in our day and age with fertility drugs, having a multiple pregnancy is still a rare and precious blessing that most women wait a lifetime to experience and often times never do.
- **NEVER** tell her that God must have taken her child because of some horrible deformity or disease. I have yet to know of most women who have lost a child that would not **GLADLY** take any deformity or illness just to have their baby alive and with them.
- **NEVER** tell her that you know how she feels! No one truly knows how anyone feels about any situation. This can be a trigger for some serious issues within her heart regarding the person who said it. She will feel like she is alone to a certain extent and this statement will be hurtful to her.
- **NEVER** tell her to “Just get over it.” With her hormones raging as is normal in all postpartum periods and with the death of her baby and her dreams for her baby, she will have to move through the stages of grief. This could happen with some women in a matter of weeks, and for some it could take a year or more. Always be gentle with her, let her know you care about her, and pray for her daily.
- **NEVER** tell your story (which may be somewhat similar or may even be identical in your view) to try and help her through hers. Often times, your story will add even more depression to her and she is handling enough already. Perhaps your story may not match up to hers (if you miscarried a baby in the first trimester and she has had a stillbirth at 25 weeks; or perhaps your baby died prematurely at 19 weeks and her baby was born and then died a few hours after birth) and even though you may think it helps you understand her (which it most likely does) it may be an offense to her to hear it at the time. Wait until she asks you to share your story. Eventually she may be at a point where hearing that others have walked a similar road will be a help to her. This may also encourage her to open up and share more with you, thus aiding her healing—but don’t force this before she is ready just because you need to share your own story.
- **NEVER** tell her it is God’s will. Even though ultimately this is true and happens to be the most common response from believers—if she is a believer, she will already know this and is most likely not battling with God here. She is merely dealing with her grief. Such a statement may make her feel that you doubt her trust and faith in God. She may feel she needs to explain and defend herself and it can get overwhelming. If she is a non-believer, she does not need to hear this statement because in her hour of grief she may be looking for someone or something to blame—and your comment could cause her to become angry with God. This may be the very thing that might bring her to Him—and thus we would not want to say something that could turn her away.

Sometimes you will not know what to say. In this case, and because often there just is not anything you can say to make her feel better, silence, coupled with prayer, is the best policy. It is so hard for us to let go because our nature as women is to “fix” things and make the people we love feel better. But when our loved one loses a baby at any stage, only God can heal her heart. Don’t get down on yourself during this process. Be patient with her, be available to her to listen, be ready and willing to cry with her and hug her if she needs it, give her practical help and organize others who will help in this way as well; and finally, guard her from unnecessary and uneducated comments.

Your love for your friend or family member will be the catalyst that helps her grieve and heal. God will move mightily within her and if she does not know God personally, her tenderness at this time may open doors for you to share of God’s love and ultimate sacrifice at Calvary for her! God’s grace is amazing at the times we need it most—and the loss of a child at any stage is one of those times when His grace is most priceless! May God bless you as you reach out to the one suffering such a loss!