

Professionally Speaking....

by Denise M. Paul MA, CT

Grief Cannot Be Measured By The Size of The Coffin

Unite, Inc. is an organization that offers grief support following miscarriage, stillbirth, and early infant death, which means that a wide variety of losses are discussed in our support groups. A woman who is grieving the loss of her full term stillborn baby may be sitting next to a woman who experienced a very early miscarriage. The two losses may look very different, but the grieving process may still be very much the same. The parents of a stillborn baby may have had the opportunity to hold their baby, take pictures, and even have a funeral service to honor their little one, while the parents of the baby who was miscarried very early may not even know the sex of their baby. You have no baby to hold and no pictures to take. To make matters worse, society diminishes the severity of your loss if you “only” have a miscarriage. Miscarriages are often swept under the rug, which leaves grieving parents alone in their sadness.

Whether the loss occurs in the first trimester or the third, your loss can be equally traumatic and devastating to you and your family. Your baby’s death is a profound loss because your attachment may have begun even before conception. Lost are the hopes and dreams that you had for your baby. No matter how far along the pregnancy was, parents may experience the same feelings of sadness, shock, failure, guilt, and anger. You have not only lost a child, you have lost the chance to see your baby grow, become a vital part of the family and realize his or her potential. It represents a denial of part of your future. The monthly Unite meetings are often the only safe place that couples have to talk about their babies, without being shunned or judged. Here we acknowledge all losses, no matter how early in the pregnancy.

For mothers experiencing a miscarriage, the pregnancy itself holds the most memories of this baby. You may recollect the day you discovered you were pregnant, the first time you heard the heartbeat, or the first ultrasound image. Your “positive” pregnancy test strip or an ultrasound picture may be cherished as mementos. You may collect recordings of special songs you associate with your baby or your pregnancy. Even if you were pregnant for a short time, you can save anything you associate with this time period. It’s never too late to make a baby blanket, buy a teddy bear, light a candle or display an ornament for your baby. Anything that you may have purchased in advance for your baby may be something that *belonged* to this baby. As you grieve, you can reflect on memories of being with your baby while your baby was cradled inside you.

Perhaps one of the most important things to remember is that there is no right or wrong way to grieve, and there is no established length of time for the process. Moreover, no two people grieve in the same way or with the same intensity. Unite’s mission is to honor all of your much loved babies – no matter how small.