

CLUB TIPS for Bereavement Support

Grief can accompany any major change, which seems to shatter lives into many little pieces. Grief is the process of gathering up those pieces to fit them back together. The emotional suffering caused by a significant change in a person's life is never just one feeling, but a mixture of many.

The healing process is made up of five recognizable stages: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. They may overlap, combine and occur in various orders and the grief process varies from person to person.

Some people view the prolonged emotional pain of grief as a sign of weakness; however, experiencing grief is not related to emotional strength. The complex process of grief cannot be speeded up, despite "instant" solutions sought by many in today's world. It may take two years or longer to work through the grief process. And many people experience grief, to some degree, for the rest of their lives.

Men and women share equal feelings of pain and grief, but women use their social support systems to help them through mourning, and men often do not. During the grieving process, often a strain develops in one's relationships, which adds to the stress. All individuals need the support and encouragement to talk about their grief. Many people are helped by attending support groups comprised of others sharing the same kind of grief, such as the loss of a spouse, loss of a child, loss through suicide, death by accident (i.e., violent means, drunk driver, etc.), loss after a terminal illness, or a sudden death.

WHAT CLUBS OR INDIVIDUALS CAN DO AFTER A DEATH - GENERAL SUGGESTIONS

- Be of service—do anything that needs doing.
- Care for small children or pets.
- Offer to make phone calls, or stay home to take calls.
- Run errands or accompany the bereaved to offer support.
- Serve food or beverages to visitors.
- Supply a meal or meals—arrange a meal delivery schedule with others.
- Drive people to and from airport, funeral, etc.
- Take care of mail or other correspondence.
- House sit during wake and funeral (times when robberies often occur).
- Ask bereaved about preferences regarding donating money--new funds such as scholarships, or existing organizations that were helpful may be named, as well as the church of the deceased.
- Express your sorrow—tell how you will miss the deceased.
- Spend time with the bereaved; periods of shared silence also offer comfort.
- Comfort with a touch when you don't know what to say.
- Acknowledge the right to grieve—don't be afraid to cry with them.
- Suggest specific local support groups for bereaved (with meeting times, address and/or phone number).
- Keep in touch after the funeral, focus on the needs of those left—invite them to do things with you.
- Call to talk and LISTEN without offering advice.

WHAT CLUBS OR INDIVIDUALS CAN DO AFTER THE DEATH OF A MULTIPLE BIRTH CHILD

Multiple births are unique in our society. Multiples bring special attention to themselves and their parents; they bring prestige and importance to the family; and they are totally unique in their own special relationship with each other. But if one of the multiples dies during the pregnancy, at birth or shortly after, everyone faces a grief that is also unique.

At some point, nearly every multiples club will be faced with the death of one or more babies. With early ultrasound diagnosis of multiple pregnancy, many parents will already be involved with a club. Your club may be faced with several different situations:

- A mother who has lost a multiple who has not had any contact with a club.
- A mother who is a member or known to the club who has a miscarriage or whose baby or babies die late in pregnancy, at birth, or during infancy.
- A club member who loses one or more multiples to SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome) or from illness or accident during infancy.
- A current club member or former member whose multiple dies as a result of childhood illness or accident.
- A current club member or former member whose multiple dies as a teenager or adult.

Each situation will be handled in a different way, but you cannot ignore or avoid these parents. They remain parents of multiples and need your support and the information you can provide. Be prepared as a group to face bereavement. Educate yourselves on the subject of multiple birth loss. Here are some suggestions:

- Read and have available in your club library information on multiple loss.
- Form a committee for bereavement support activities if your club is a large one or has suffered many losses. (Coordinator, club members and parents who have lost one or more multiples).
- Discuss the effects of a multiple's death at a club meeting, perhaps asking a bereaved parent or support group facilitator to join the discussion. Visit local hospitals to see how they handle the loss of a multiple(s). Donate written materials.
- Make and distribute bereavement support flyers along with your club information to social service agencies, clinics, and physicians.
- If the family is not well known by the club, send a sympathy card and tell them you have bereavement information when they are ready for it.
- Keep a list of contacts—other parents who have suffered a loss and are willing to talk to other grieving parents.
- Be familiar with the importance of parents seeing and holding their baby(ies) who died; having a photo of both babies together, if possible; determining zygosity; planning the service themselves, and gathering mementos (lock of hair, name band, footprints, etc.) and also not destroying objects associated with the baby(ies)...so that if you are talking with someone who has just had a loss, you can be sure to mention these things while the opportunity still exists for the parents to do them.
- Keep in touch. Encourage parents to talk about the deceased—use their names, acknowledge the loss of their multiple/s (even if one survives), ask about the deceased's personality, ask to see pictures, ask about the pregnancy and birth weights, etc. Do not act as if this child never existed or could be replaced by another child.
- Let parents know they are still parents of multiples and give them an opportunity to read about or be around multiples/parents of multiples, if that is their wish.
- Offer to take care of selling twin equipment, clothing, etc. (especially double strollers), however they may want to keep some items.
- Acknowledge the birth and death in your club newsletter. If you have a loss group, provide a special place in your club newsletter for them to discuss their activities and print articles, stories, or poems from parents who have suffered a loss.

Many people are uncomfortable with death, so choose carefully the person who will make the initial contact with the family. In most clubs, the president makes the initial contact with the bereaved parents. Here are a few suggestions:

- Prepare yourself ahead of time by knowing the exact circumstances of death.
- Don't be put off by an angry or withdrawn response. Grieving parents are in shock and their anger is not directed at you. Call again in a few days.
- Don't worry if you get a tearful response. The emotions were there; you didn't cause the tears.
- Allow yourself your own emotions. Don't apologize for your tears.
- Be a good listener! You are offering your sympathy and support, but don't do all the talking or be tempted to fill silences with tales of yours or others' losses. Encourage the mother to talk about the baby or child, the circumstances of the death and any concerns she has at that moment regardless of how inappropriate it may sound to you.
- Offer bereavement information or referrals to helping agencies, but don't press. Provide the address for Bereavement Support information that Multiples of America offers, encouraging the parent to contact Multiples of America, when ready, and telling her that she will receive a response from a mother who has also lost multiples.
- Offer positive support from the club, like babysitting or providing a meal or dessert. Ask if your own twins would disturb them if a daytime visit is all that is possible.
- Take seriously any reference that a parent may make to you about ending their own life seriously. Contact a professional or another family member to intervene.

From the time of death and for many years afterwards, the parents may be very concerned about the effects on the surviving multiple. It is impossible to know what is in the mind of so tiny a baby, but having shared the womb for many months with a brother or sister, the baby may sense someone is missing. The surviving baby or babies may:

- Seem to cry more often than the average baby, or cry for no apparent reason.
- Draw pictures in preschool or kindergarten of two people instead of one when they draw themselves, even if they have never been told they are a twin.
- Draw pictures of objects and people with parts missing.
- Share after they are grown that they are lonely or have a sense of incompleteness.

It is much easier for the surviving multiple(s) to accept what has happened if they are brought up to talk naturally about the death of the multiple(s) from an early age. They will then feel free to ask any worrisome questions and will be able to talk about their feelings.

There is no timetable for grief or any set pattern to grieving. Grief goes through stages before healing can begin, and these stages can take many months or even years. Do what you can as a club to support the grieving family.

Those who have experienced the loss of a multiple birth child or children feel strongly that many of these losses could have been prevented. It is our hope that in the future there will be better funding for the prevention of twin loss, especially in the prevention of miscarriage and prematurity. Research is also needed on the possible effects on surviving babies and on the parenting of these survivors.

Some of Multiples of America's partner organizations provide support specific to bereavement.

Graham's Foundation <https://grahamsfoundation.org/>
Project Sweet Peas <https://www.projectsweetpeas.com/>
The Skylar Project <https://theskylarproject.org/>

Our sister organization based in the United Kingdom, Twins Trust, provides a free online booklet as well as other bereavement resources. <https://twinstrust.org/bereavement/support.html>

We also encourage all clubs with suggestions of bereavement support activities to share those with the Research & Membership Development Vice President through Multiples of America's Executive Office:
info@multiplesofamerica.org