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Emilia's Wings

Healing Words for Pregnancy & Infant Loss

"There is no footprint so small that it
does not leave an imprint on this world."

~ANONYMOUS

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When someone you love loses a baby, you may feel paralyzed - helpless and uncertain about how to respond. You may be tempted to remain silent for fear of saying the wrong things or bringing more sadness to the surface. The stark reality is that many parents who have survived such tragedy feel that silence from family and friends is far worse. Acknowledgement of their grief, however small, speaks volumes.

While saying something in place of nothing is important and encouraged, some remarks may leave a grieving parent reeling. Generally speaking, people mean well. They would not seek to intentionally hurt a bereaved family member or friend. As hard as we try, it is often difficult to look past one's own intentions to understand the meaning that words and phrases can convey.

Just as every person is unique, so too is their grief. What may be comforting to one may not console another. We encourage you to read and reflect on the *What Not To Say* and *What To Say* chapters of this guide. Our hope is that you may obtain a better understanding of the pain experienced through pregnancy and infant loss and that you feel more prepared to support your loved one on their journey through grief.

- What Not to Say -

1. **"Time heals all wounds."**

Not all wounds heal, no matter how much time passes. This is a broad, over-used cliché that generally provides little encouragement. As time marches on, a bereaved parent simply learns how to live with their pain. Grief becomes a natural part of life, an awkward dance of living with both sadness and joy present at the same time. Death forces us to learn how to live without our child and the pain is forever woven into your existence.

2. **"At least you didn't really know your baby."**

"Imagine the pain if your child had lived & then died."

"It could be worse. I know someone who ..."

Grief is an individual process. No two people grieve exactly the same. Diminishing someone's grief based on a timeline or comparing grief is dismissive and hurtful. We begin bonding with our children the moment we find out we are pregnant and the death of a child (no matter the age) is life-changing.

3. **"God needed another little angel."**

"God has a plan and this is His will."

"God doesn't give you more than you can handle."

It is common for individuals to feel disconnected from religion and God following the death of a loved one. Confusion and anger, among a wide range of other emotions, is a natural and common response toward one's

- What Not To Say -

own higher power. Refrain from comments that invoke religion to justify or explain the death of a child. Spiritual beliefs are wide-ranging, and for many, intimately personal. Grief following a loss is never an acceptable opportunity to introduce someone to your belief system without invitation.

4. **"It's a blessing in disguise."**

"Everything happens for a reason."

"Maybe something was wrong & this is for the best."

"Maybe it was because of ..."

These statements suggest that a parent's life was somehow made easier through the loss of their child. They further suggest that given the choice between managing a medical condition or not having the child, that the best outcome is to simply not have the child. Our society is one that prides itself on "fixing the broken". We tend to derive our self-worth from always having an answer to life's challenges. The messy truth is that sometimes there will never be an answer. We may never understand why our children died, but with time we may each reach a point where we are at peace with all of the unknowns.

5. **"I know how you feel."**

Each person's grief is as unique as their fingerprint. And as with our fingerprints, no two stories are exactly the same. Do not be afraid to share your story. Sharing your story will help you connect to the bereaved on a deeper level and show them that they are not alone in their journey. Be cautious, however, with how you draw

- What Not To Say -

equivalence. As similar as some stories may be, they can affect us in very different ways. Treat your bereaved loved one or friend as though their feelings are unique, and invite them to share how they feel with you before drawing comparisons to your personal journey.

6. **"At least you know you can get pregnant again."**

"At least you have other children."

"Had you never lost your baby, you would have never had your other child."

Though some lives are shorter than others, they all carry equal significance in the heart of a parent. No living child, before or after, can ever overshadow or replace a child who has died. In the same way that having an existing child does not make the grieving process easier, the prospect of a future child never dulls the pain of one you have lost. Having children is not like baseball. There are no trades.

7. **"Don't worry, this will never happen again."**

Losing a child is more common than one may realize - in the United States, pregnancy and infant loss alone affects 1 in 4 pregnancies. Though many women who lose a child will go on to deliver healthy babies, the risk of a subsequent loss is always there and it is always at the forefront of their minds. In losing a child, we become painfully aware of the risks. Statistics become more than just a number. They become names, faces, and stories. Be optimistic. Be supportive. But don't be the bearer of false hope, and don't make a promise that no one can keep.

- What Not To Say -

8. **"It is time to move on."**

Your bereaved friend or loved one will likely carry the memory of their precious child with them for the rest of their life. They are borne by their experience into a “new normal” with a new sense of self. Be accepting of the fact that there may never be a return to their “old self.”

Unlike the trains in Italy, grief never runs on time. There is always a starting block, but there is never a finish line.

9. **"Be happy knowing your child is in a better place."**

Just as you should avoid making spiritual claims unless invited to do so, you should also refrain from implying that losing a child somehow results in a better outcome for the parent or their child. There may be a generally accepted spiritual view of a “better place”, but in the mind of a grieving parent, there is no better place for a child than in their arms.

10. **"Be sensitive to others and don't talk about your deceased child."**

"Don't have photos of your child placed where people can see them."

The ways in which a grieving parent chooses to honor and remember their child are their own decisions to make.

Some parents are more comfortable sharing their story, speaking about their child, and bringing awareness to their child's life. Others are not there yet, and may never be. Don't expect a grieving parent to operate within the bounds of your comfort zone.

- What Not To Say -

11. "Remember to be strong for your living children."

As parents, our number-one job is to be role models to our children. To achieve this, we must show them that grief and emotions are healthy, natural, and encouraged. Children learn behaviors through observation. By displaying healthy grief and vulnerability to their children, your bereaved friend or loved one can demonstrate how to express many different kinds of emotions and encourage their children to share their own feelings in healthy ways as well.

- What To Say -

1. **"I'm Sorry."**

There are no words that can ever take away a parent's pain after they have said goodbye to their child. But sometimes, simply saying "I'm sorry" is exactly what a bereaved parent needs to hear.

2. **"I wish I had the right words. Just know I care."**

You may never have the perfect words to share with someone in their darkest moment, and that is okay. Showing that you care about your bereaved friend or loved one demonstrates that you recognize their loss and are there for them.

3. **"I would like to be here for you. Is it alright if I ...?"**

Everyday life is hectic. We take pause in the days immediately following a loss, but life does not. Your friend or loved one will undoubtedly find themselves playing catch-up on everything from household chores to making arrangements for their deceased child. The best way to help is to be direct and offer concrete suggestions as to what you would like to do for them. Humans are by nature very independent. We may not seek out help, even when we need it the most. Sometimes, help must find us.

4. **"Can I bring you some dinner?"**

Offering food is a long-time tradition of comfort and support in the aftermath of a loss. Meal trains are an excellent way to coordinate efforts between friends and family to provide food for grieving parents. Be sure to inquire about any food allergies and preferences,

- What To Say -

especially for families with young children and picky eaters.

5. **"Tell me all about your baby."**

"I'd love to see photos of your child."

Ask them about their child. "What did he/she look like?" If you feel comfortable, ask them to share photos with you or invite them to share their birth story. Most parents enjoy talking about their baby and may find sharing to be therapeutic. Be prepared that the parent may get emotional, but know that this isn't necessarily an indicator that you should change topics. Though some people may not feel ready to share, asking will show that you care and wish to remember their baby with them.

6. **"Just checking in to let you know that I've been thinking of you."**

As weeks and months pass, it's easy for a bereaved parent to feel like their child has been forgotten. A simple gesture such as a note or phone call to let your friend or loved one know that you are still thinking of them can mean the world.

7. **Remember their child on birthdays and holidays.**

The best gift for a bereaved parent is the remembrance of their child. Let them know that you are thinking of them on the child's birthday and date of passing. Wish them a happy Mother's or Father's Day and remember them on holidays. Including their baby's name on a Christmas card is especially meaningful. Seeing their baby's name will acknowledge their child and make their day.

- What To Say -

8. Say nothing at all - just be there.

If you are struggling to find the right words, that's okay. Offer a sincere hug and a shoulder to cry on, and be there for your friend or loved one to share their emotions with. Sometimes saying nothing at all and simply being there in their time of need can make all the difference in the world.