

Teach me to say goodbye

Perinatal and neonatal mourning



Dedicated to Adriana.

To all the beautiful children born lifeless, to their mothers and fathers.



Perinatal death is defined as the loss of the child from week 22 of gestation (when the baby weighs a minimum of 500 g) until the first seven days of life. Neonatal mortality refers to the death of a baby in the first month following birth. This type of bereavement brings severe suffering for parents, marking a clear life and family crisis. Sometimes, trauma is even greater when the direct cause of death is unknown.

*"I have always hated it when they say
there is no word that denotes the loss of a child.
The words continue to be father and mother"*

(Albert Espinosa, "Compasses in Search of Lost Smiles")



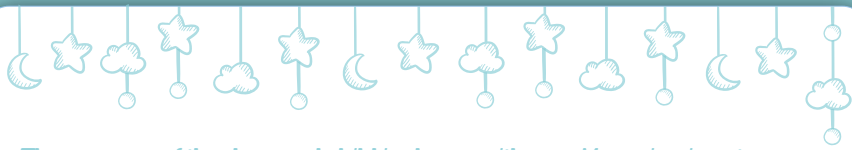
Unauthorised mourning, ignored mourning.

Although it is a recurring circumstance, (1 out of every 4 pregnancies culminate in foetal death), it is not spoken about socially, and even the family environment tends to trivialise it and not want to name it, so parents who endure this traumatic experience feel helpless to express their grief, and they are not aided to express their pain in all its magnitude and complexity.

There is also a series of false beliefs at a social level that further silence this bereavement, including the belief that as a pregnancy progresses, a loss causes greater trauma and pain, so earlier foetal deaths are not painful for parents, and they can be quickly "gotten over". Furthermore, children who have died during these stages of pregnancy are sometimes not even considered living beings. And the idea that pregnant women experience this loss more traumatically, relegating the father to a secondary emotional level, is unrealistic. Both parents must be considered mourners, and they should be supported in their own pain.

Mourning unfulfilled dreams.

The deceased child was part of the parents' future plans, becoming the focus of their lives. When these dreams are suddenly unfulfilled, the mourning that begins includes breaking with that past and with an exciting future that the couple created together and on which they strengthened part of their relationship, but which will no longer come.



The memory of the deceased child is always with you. Mourning is not forgetting; mourning is honouring the child with his or her name and memory, whether he or she has a long life or just a fleeting moment with the parents.

And from now on...?



- ↪ Allow time and space for inner **solitude and recollection**.
- ↪ In terms of the couple, you will go through very complicated times: **allow each other solitude**, personal space and openly share what you feel each day as a couple. The other's emotions must be validated, not judged, allowing your partner the time they need to manage their own grief.
- ↪ If there are **other children in the relationship**, it is advisable to inform them of the situation, adapting the message to the child's age, so that they can say goodbye and conduct their own mourning.
- ↪ Despite the baby's death, the mother's body will reflect the symptoms of having given birth, so care must be taken not only to nurse the emotional part, but also her body's postpartum recovery.
- ↪ It is recommended not to make decisions with regard to what to do with the preparations you had for your child (room, cot, clothes, etc.) for a while. Later, you will gradually identify your wishes with greater serenity (saving everything for another pregnancy, donating it...). If you need to, you can go to the room whenever necessary, letting out any emotions that may come **without judgment and without setting limits**.
- ↪ In time, parents will assimilate the memory of the deceased child and **it will occupy a special and lasting place in their lives**, keeping them present daily and converting pain into different visions of life and into the scale of their values.
- ↪ Importance of family support. If necessary, discuss with the family the needs you have so that they know **how we want and need to be helped**.
- ↪ If you are a relative/friend, bear in mind that the deceased child's life remains present with the parents: **that baby was born with a name and a birthday** that parents will need to keep in mind all their life.

↪ If you are a relative/friend, listen to parents when they talk about their deceased child, let them remember them whenever they wish and do not underplay their testimony and pain. Saying something in consolation is not necessary; consolation is not possible, but you will help a lot if you convey your condolences and accompany them empathetically, listening and directly asking how you can help them.

↪ Don't use phrases like the following, because, even if you use them to help, they probably cause parents further pain: *"Don't cry, another child will come..."* *"You will get pregnant again soon, you'll see..."* *"It was very young, just a little thing, it's not that bad, stop crying."* *"This happens to many people, don't worry, you'll get over it..."* *"If it has happened that way, it is for a reason, now there is an angel in heaven..."* *"You have to be strong for your other children..."*

↪ The support of a psychologist for a while will prove to be decisive help in the subsequent reconstruction process: individual therapy, shared therapy with other couples who have lost a child, and support for the couple in the shared mourning process.

Bereavement is internally recognising that we are the parents of a deceased child.

Fear of future pregnancies



The **emotional bond with the child** starts even before pregnancy when parents make their first wishes and thoughts with regard to the idea of being parents.

When a foetal death occurs, the moment it happens during pregnancy, it represents an instant rupture with the whole past and future history forged around them and the existence of this child.

Giving them the appropriate space to mourn, making it a **natural and beautiful experience to remember the child**, is key to the grief and pain that this experience entails. Mourning a stillborn infant requires a process that must be respected and experienced, individually, in a couple and with the family and social environment, and a new pregnancy should never be desired as a formula to alleviate the pain of the previous loss.

With the subsequent birth of a child, **the previous existence of the stillborn child will continue to have its place, with his or her own name, identity and history.**



It is necessary to prepare to find out how to approach a new pregnancy, as moments of anxiety and stress are likely to occur. Being helped by a psychologist will be incredibly important to know how to manage these symptoms, while assuming that there is a risk associated with another loss but learning how to manage strategies for controlling pensive thoughts and stress.

Strengthening the couple's bond will be very important, through increasing communication and emotional expression between both partners.

Healthcare professionals



Aspects such as monitoring and education during pregnancy and postpartum (e.g. precise information on managing lactogenesis) are the specific functions of healthcare professionals. However, it is true that **education and knowledge** need to be strengthened in the approach to perinatal and neonatal deaths, especially in order to know how to use emotional tools suited to the parents' level of suffering at that time. Healthcare staff must use sensitive and respectful language that is in keeping with the circumstances: **the death of a living being, of a person, of a child who has a name and parents who love him or her, and who find themselves at the most dreadful moment of their lives.**

It will be very important at this time to guide parents on how to deal with the situation they are suffering, to accompany them at all times, to allow them space for privacy and recollection, provide them with the company of other relatives and emotional and psychological support, as well as expediting any administrative procedures they may require.



When the parents' relatives are offered the possibility to also see the stillborn baby to meet, see and touch him or her in the hospital together with parents, they are ensuring the parents' environment does not deny the baby's life and death, but internalises it and talks about it with parents.



Adriana


My name is Laura, and I am a mum, a mum who is somewhat different; I'm a mum in mourning. Maybe you are too, or maybe you know someone who is, so I want to tell you something.

In the seventh month of pregnancy, all my fears were fulfilled when I heard four words: "there is no heartbeat". My daughter, Adriana's heart stopped and the world stopped. It is often thought that to die we must first be born. That day I learned that to die, you just have to be alive and Adriana was alive inside me for more than seven months. That's why I can say that I'm a mum, like my husband can say that he's a dad, even if she died. After fifteen hours of childbirth, Adriana was born, silently, she did not cry, her father and I did it for her. Suddenly something as full of life as childbirth can be transformed into the exact opposite, it is hard to understand. When someone asks me if I have children, the answer is a resounding yes. Adriana is my daughter. She was since I wanted to be a mother, before even getting pregnant, and she still is now, despite her death.

No matter the number of months of pregnancy, no matter the days or hours he or she lived outside the womb before dying, a child is a child no matter what and, when they die, everything falls apart.

It might be hard to understand that we suffer bereavement over the loss of someone we did not have in theory, that's where the big mistake lies. I cannot actually remember the colour of her eyes, they were closed; nor her crying, there was only silence; nor her smile... but I imagined a thousand times, while touching my belly, what her tone of voice would be saying "mummy", her first tooth, her first fever, the first day of school, even her first love! Adriana is not just a baby who died, she is a whole person who will not live, she understands my pain. Despite everything, I remember all the hope and happiness that she brought to my life, being able to hold her in my arms, even if it was only once, feeling her skin, kissing her face... So much unconditional love, so unconditional that her death didn't even stop it.

Adriana made me a mum living inside me and her death didn't take away that privilege. She made me a mum in mourning, mourning that I will go through and I will leave being Laura, Adriana's mum forever.



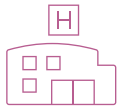
If you are a mother/father,
it is your right:

To be able to see your deceased child immediately, to touch, smell, be with him or her for as long as you need and be able to say goodbye. To be able to take photos of your child if you wish.



To have space and respect around you to conduct the farewell ritual you choose.

To take care of your baby's body to arrange for burial or cremation. Request it at the hospital.



To be able to know clearly and transparently the information that the hospital has in relation to the child's death.

To be assisted by a healthcare team prepared for technical and emotional assistance in perinatal and neonatal mourning, using personal treatment and language and terminology appropriate to the magnitude of the traumatic experience that parents are experiencing.



To have a personal space to honour your child's existence and their memory.

You may be entitled to benefits for the child's birth and care or maternity/paternity leave. Find out more at the corresponding institutions in your area so that you know your rights.



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