

The Value of Support Groups

Life after a pregnancy loss can feel extremely lonely for bereaved parents. Not only do they deeply and viscerally miss their babies, but once others move on with their lives, mothers and fathers who are still grieving can feel terribly isolated and alone. Support groups have often been a lifesaver for parents in the months following their loss.

I have been a Volunteer Counselor with the Pregnancy Loss Support Program of the National Council of Jewish Women, New York Section since 1986 and have experienced how helpful the PLSP has been in offering comfort and understanding to grieving individuals and couples. Through our nationwide telephone counseling and our peer support groups, our program guides bereaved mothers and fathers as they learn to manage their grief and connect to other parents who have also suffered losses.

Our support groups meet one night a week for six consecutive weeks and are offered to New York City metropolitan area parents. They are co-facilitated by our professionally trained female and male volunteers, all of whom, like myself, have suffered a pregnancy loss and are experienced in guiding discussion and explaining the grieving process.

As a group co-facilitator and telephone counselor, I have watched the magic that occurs when people who feel they are too sad to help others in a support group, still manage to do so by offering not only their own stories, but by simply providing their presence and their ability to listen and to witness. This miraculous consequence of being in a support group can re-build resilience after a pregnancy loss in very specific ways:

Support groups can reduce your sense of isolation. Despite the fact that pregnancy loss is more common than one would wish, most bereaved parents suffer because they feel so alone. When you begin attending a support group you will look around the room and see other intelligent, successful, resourceful people who feel just as isolated as you do.

The feelings that pregnancy loss often creates, such as depression, loss of self-esteem, anger, and envy, can lead grieving parents to withdraw and distance themselves

from others. You, too, may retreat into social isolation because you find the child-bearing world of your peers too painful a reminder of what you have lost.

When you join a support group, you will learn you are not alone, that others feel the same way you do, and have struggled to cope, just as you have. The common sorrow of suffering a pregnancy loss creates an almost immediate sense of empathy and safety.

As the sessions continue and the bonds between you and the other group members become stronger, you may begin to actually look forward to attending the group as a place where you feel you can be open and honest, a place where you are accepted as you are, a place where you feel safe.

Support groups can help normalize the grief experience for both partners.

Women grieving pregnancy loss often feel that they are losing their minds, and their partners are often so worried about the mothers of their babies that they neglect their own emotional needs. A support group, particularly a couples' group, can help a woman—and her partner—realize that her feelings and reactions are normal. The group can also provide partners with an understanding of the grieving process and ways to make sure they have support for themselves and their own grief. It can allow both parents to feel the personal acceptance fostered within the group setting.

Support groups can instill hope. Group participants often share information about treatment, doctors, resources, and coping techniques. Support groups also tend to encourage assertion among their members, creating strong empowering forces. The hope that is instilled can help nourish the realistic optimism necessary for effective problem solving and the decision making for future family-building choices.

Support groups offer the opportunity to both give and receive. Sometimes couples feel so emotionally depleted from their losses that they start to believe they have nothing left to give to others. Finding that kernel of concern, caring, and empathy for others within the group is a welcome reminder of your own humanity and strength. There is no better antidote to feelings of vulnerability and helplessness than knowing you can count on a group of people to support you through your grief process...and knowing that others can count on you to support them.

Parents often report on leaving a support group with a growing sense of well-being and empowerment. Laughing together, even through one's tears, creates a normalizing sense of community that may continue after the group has ended formal meetings. E-mails are exchanged and friendships form. The following quote from Thomas Jefferson very beautifully conveys the value of pregnancy loss peer support groups:

Who can so softly bind up the wound of another, as he who has felt the same wound himself.

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