

20 ways to support loved ones as they grieve the loss of a baby

Last fall when my nephew Georgie passed away at 34 weeks in utero, I wasn't sure how I could best support my sister and brother-in-law. When their friends and extended family asked what they could do, I didn't feel I had much to offer. I'm still not sure I do.

Recently, however, I asked Georgie's parents what has helped them, in the hopes that some concrete ideas would help those of us who feel so helpless as we watch loved ones grieve.

Every situation is different, and everyone grieves differently, of course. And much of this might help support anyone who has lost a loved one. But when people lose infants during pregnancy or shortly after birth, no one seems to know how to respond to the couple's grief while also celebrating the baby's life.



Here are a few ideas:

1. Pray. Have a Mass offered for the family. Send a spiritual bouquet.

2. Write a note or send a card. Send flowers. If you don't know what to say, just say, "I'm sorry." Don't say anything you wouldn't say about the loss of any other loved one (i.e., "Maybe you'll have another father one day" or "At least you have other siblings." The parents are mourning the loss of this child and they always will.)

3. Make a donation in memory of the baby. The parents might have a specific charity in mind, but you could also just pick your favorite charity.

4. Send food or a restaurant gift card.



5. If you are a close friend or family member, offer to contact people to spread the news. If you do it in writing and receive written expressions of sympathy, save them to share with the parents when they are ready.

6. Offer to help write thank you notes for expressions of sympathy.

7. Offer to help clear baby things away. But don't assume the parents want them put away. Everyone processes and grieves differently.

8. Ask the baby's name. Then use it often.

9. Remember the baby's birthday and anniversary.



10. When you see the parents for the first time after their loss, don't pretend that nothing has happened. A simple "I'm sorry" goes a long way.

11. If the parents have other children, offer to watch them to help give the parents time to grieve together.

12. If there is a memorial service, go. If you feel up to it, offer to man the guestbook, take coats, greet people, drive the couple to and from the church and cemetery, or any other task you can think of that might be helpful. And, if there is a guestbook, sign it. The baby's parents may not remember everyone they talked to, but they will have that book to remember everyone who cared enough to come.

13. Recognize that this loss touches not just the baby's parents and siblings, but the baby's grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Expressions of sympathy and concern mean so, so much.

14. If you have children, consider that being around your children might be hard for the parents right now—and maybe for a long time. When you do see them, you may want to arrange for a sitter for your children. Be very gentle and considerate announcing your future pregnancies.

15. Visit the baby's grave. And tell your friends that you went. It can be as simple as emailing a photo of the flowers you placed there.



16. As time goes by, invite your friend to do something together. Don't be offended if he or she says, "I'm not ready." Promise that you'll be there. Then follow through. If you say, "Let's do lunch sometime to talk," make sure you actually do lunch.

17. Give a thoughtful memento, maybe a piece of jewelry for the mother, a statue or an icon, or a rosary with the baby's name in the beads.

18. Offer to share your talents. You might know how to design a memorial or birth announcement, be a photographer who could take photos at the hospital of the precious time the parents have with their baby, or-later on-have the ability to create a scrapbook to celebrate the baby's life.

19. Ask if you may visit the mother while she recovers. Being stuck in the house during the recovery, knowing that under other circumstances, she might be taking care of a baby, is very difficult and lonely. Offer to stop by and visit. Bring a meal or treat or make tea. And make it clear that she doesn't need to clean the house for you.

20. Be there for the parents. They might not know what they need or what they're ready for. But knowing that their friends are there for them when they need someone will help. Sometimes they may need someone to cry with. Sometimes they may need someone to have fun with. Sometimes they may just need a listening ear. Let the parents know you're available. And then be available when they reach out to you.



If you've experienced the loss of an infant, or if you've supported friends and family through that loss, what would you add?