

ARC

Antenatal Results & Choices ●

Help for Fathers

*Supporting you through
difficult family times*

Introduction

For a man who wants to be a father, pregnancy is a time of hope, with expectations for his family's future with a growing baby, a healthy child. However, every couple has a risk of conceiving a baby with a fetal anomaly. When prenatal tests bring news of a serious anomaly, expectant parents face the difficult decision of whether or not to continue with the pregnancy.

ARC is the only national charity that offers specialised information and support to parents facing this decision. ARC also provides ongoing support to families whatever decision is made about the pregnancy. This information leaflet is based on our work with bereaved fathers. It talks about some of the emotions other men have felt, and gives advice on how to cope after the loss of your baby.

Throughout the leaflet we talk about losing a 'baby' as this is the language most people use when contacting us. We realise that some might prefer to use the term fetus.

Antenatal testing

Over the last 30 years dramatic changes have occurred in antenatal care, with the development of new technologies to monitor the baby, and to screen and diagnose fetal anomalies. For those parents who receive difficult news, it will almost always come as a great shock, and they may face diagnosis of a condition for which there is no cure. Even for couples who know that they have a higher than average chance, for example where one or both are carriers of a condition that can be inherited, a diagnosis can hit very hard. Parents then need to make the painful and difficult decision between continuing with the affected pregnancy, knowing that their child may not survive the birth, or will have a serious disability, and ending a much wanted pregnancy.

Making the decision to continue with or end the pregnancy

This is one of the hardest decisions anyone ever has to make. Parents make this choice for many different reasons, based on the baby's condition and their own personal values and circumstances. Sometimes the condition is so severe that the baby will not survive beyond birth. For others the decision includes considering their ability to care for a disabled child and the effects on any other children, and their own lives.

Deciding how to proceed after a baby has been diagnosed with a genetic or structural condition is a decision that is never taken lightly, but it can be difficult to live with, and have long-lasting emotional effects.

Fathers struggle with loss too

The mother undergoes the physical loss of the baby, but you too have lost your baby, and will grieve. Everyone reacts in their own way and there are no right or wrong responses. However, the feelings and needs of fathers need more attention than they sometimes get. Many men find it difficult to show their feelings, having been brought up not to do so. Fathers often feel very isolated and misunderstood in this situation.

ARC can help with written information, and through the telephone/email Helpline and our online forum. We can also put you in touch with another father who is part of our support network.

Being strong for your partner

"When our world fell apart, I subconsciously assumed the 'strong' role - dealing with the outside world, showing a brave face, but in retrospect not realising that by hiding my own grief I was giving the impression of being uncaring. This may not ring true for all men, but I bet it does for quite a few." Terry

You may feel that you need to be strong for your partner. Many men find that it feels natural to adopt a supportive role at this time and help their partner, by providing a shoulder to cry on. Someone has to deal with the practical side of life, make arrangements, care for any other children, tell family and friends. Many ARC fathers have said they think they were right to take on these responsibilities, but it caused some problems in their relationships.

"For me, the down-side of taking on a strong supportive role was that I felt inhibited about expressing and perhaps experiencing my own feelings of grief. This, I'm afraid, meant that at times I appeared unaffected by what had happened and perhaps uncaring" Ray

While your partner certainly needs your support, she also needs your honesty. Some ARC fathers have said that things became very difficult. Each was doing what he thought was best for his partner, but she thought that because his reactions were not the same, he didn't care. Talking about your feelings together will help you both to understand that while your reactions to the loss of the baby may be very different from each other, this doesn't mean that either of you cares any more or less about what has happened.

You may feel resentful that other people focus all their attention on your partner, and don't ask how you are. If you are putting on too brave a face this may not help. Other people won't know what support you need if you can't tell them. You might find it helps if you can talk to people you trust about your feelings.

Grieving

"Most men try to support their partner while being emotionally hurt themselves. It helps to understand that a lot of the feelings we go through may seem irrational but are part of the grieving process." Carl

Your experience of the loss of your baby will be different from your partner's. This is a shared experience that is also very different for men and women. Some men feel that it is their responsibility to put the bereavement behind them and look to the future, whatever they may feel.

Each of us reacts individually to bereavement, and every situation is unique. Grief is a naturally isolating experience. This can be much worse in a rare situation like yours, where you never really knew the baby, and you may not know anyone else who shares your special kind of grief. There are broad patterns in any grieving process, and if you know about these, you might find your feelings are easier to deal with.

When faced with a death, we often at first experience shock and panic. It is tempting to deny the facts - 'this can't be happening to me'. We all come to believe what has happened in time, but this may bring feelings of anger that it happened to you, guilt that you are to blame in some way and jealousy of other families who don't have your problems to cope with. These feelings will fade eventually. Everyone goes through this process in their own time and way. Some people need to talk or cry; others prefer not to.

You may find that you do not grieve as your partner does; your priority may be her welfare, and the well being of your children. There is no right or wrong way to grieve and everyone copes differently. It isn't easy, and ARC or any of the other organisations listed on the back page are there to help you when things become difficult.

Going back to work

Many fathers return to work very soon after the death of the baby. Some men don't talk about their feelings even to their closest friends, so returning to face workplace colleagues is unlikely to give you the opportunity to talk about your loss and sadness.

You might find it difficult to concentrate at work and your motivation may be impaired for a while. Demands will be made of you, and you may worry that your difficulties or a prolonged absence could cause problems. You might feel the need for compassion and understanding but may not want to go into details of your bereavement with your managers or colleagues. You need time to adjust and it is important for your health that your feelings are not ignored. Seek out support and someone to talk to if you possibly can. Confidential counselling is offered in an increasing number of workplaces to help workers deal with stress. Do not be afraid to ask for support. Emotional upset and distress can sometimes entitle you to

sick leave if you wish. If work is causing you difficulties in any way, see your GP. And don't forget you can always use the ARC helpline as a source of support.

Remembering Your Baby

You will never forget your baby, but some people are unsure about formal remembrance. If you have had a funeral for your baby, then the grave may become a focus for your memories. Other parents find a memorial service is helpful. Many hospitals have a Book of Remembrance, and an entry for your baby can be written into this if you wish. Anniversaries such as when your baby died are particularly painful as are special family times such as Christmas and other religious or cultural festivals. Remembering your baby and keeping mementoes is not morbid, it is natural. ARC can give you information about some of the ways other parents have found to create memories. Other people may be frightened to mention your baby unless you do. It might help if you can let them know if you want your baby to be talked about.

Sex and relationships

Everything that has happened will have placed strains on your relationship. You may emerge from the experience feeling much closer, or sadly, rifts within that relationship may have deepened. A couples counsellor or therapist may be able to help in these circumstances. ARC can help you to find someone in your area if this is something you would like to explore.

Often, sex is associated with the loss of the baby and one or both partners feel unable to make love for a while. Some people find comfort in making love and others are frightened by their desperate need for sex. It is important to try to talk to your partner about your own feelings, and hers, to help you understand one another. If something to do with the sexual part of your relationship is placing a strain on your life, your GP may be able to help.

Another baby?

There are a number of things to consider before making the decision to try for another pregnancy. The next baby will not replace the one who has died. Allowing yourselves a period of recovery can be helpful, but time may be more important if you and/or your partner is older, or if there are fertility problems.

There may be pressure from friends or family about trying for another baby. Try to concentrate on what is best for you and your partner. You can be firm about not discussing this with other people if you need to be.

Any further pregnancies will inevitably provoke anxiety. It might help if you can make sure that your partner always has someone to go with her to antenatal appointments, for example, if she would find this helpful. You may want to seek specific testing and your consultant or genetic counsellor can advise you about what is available, and appropriate for you.

Not all parents want another baby. If you already have children, you might want to be sure that you know about any possible risks to them in their reproductive life, so genetic counselling may still be important to you.

How we can help

Many men have become involved with us by accident. It was their partners who originally emailed, or called the Helpline and later persuaded them to seek support too. Many fathers have found that making contact with others who share their experience is very helpful.

As well as the ARC Helpline, there is an ARC online support forum for fathers. The forum for men is not as active as the one for women but is safe environment in which to share thoughts and feelings. Our volunteer support network is there for both men and women. ARC also holds facilitated regional support meetings for people who have been through a termination for fetal anomaly, and many fathers find these helpful.

Talking to someone can help you feel less alone. Knowing that other men have survived this painful experience can help you now and give some hope for the future. If you think counselling or therapy may be helpful to you individually or as a couple, ARC can help you.

Things you can do

- While you may be concerned about your partner, try to find a way to look after your own needs too.
- Don't be ashamed to seek help from your GP if you feel you aren't coping.
- Contact ARC. We are here to help you.

Men speak about their experience

Here are some comments fathers have made in our online forum:

*We found some people (including close family) to be quite judgemental about how we dealt with our loss (for example I took quite a long time off work as I absolutely could not face it – some people I talked to went back to work as soon as possible though which is also valid – and people really thought I should have gone back sooner but I, with hindsight, am extremely glad I listened to myself and took the time I needed. I think had I gone back to work I would have buried it all and not dealt with the grieving). It is your story though and whatever feels right to you is the only way. **Dan***

A year ago I thought the grief and the way in which it affected us both had destroyed everything there had ever been between us. Basically I tried to block the pain and keep my head down to prevent myself from losing the plot completely which had the unfortunate side effect of making my wife think I had no feeling and was not affected by our loss.

My wife was very strong throughout the whole ordeal and we coped well but we stopped talking, well I did because I just couldn't bear to keep raking over what happened as there was no logic to it just pain.

*As I look back the biggest mistake I made was to stop communicating with my wife and boy did that cause me some trouble. **Jason***

*Whilst I've shed my tears, I've also been the stereotypical 'rock' throughout and have no idea when or how or if it should ever be my turn to break down. It almost seems like I've been avoiding it, like I'm made of stone. I always felt I had no heart until I met her and then with the pregnancy, I found myself melting inside when I saw other people with their children. I wanted that for myself. For us. I know it will happen again for us. **John***

*The one thing I learnt on days when my wife would sit in the middle of the kitchen for an entire day and cry was that there was nothing I could do to fix her. But just by being there for her was the most important thing that I could have done. Take time for yourself to grieve as well. After three months of being a rock to my wife I had a bit of a breakdown and went to counselling for a few months to deal with the way that I was feeling about the loss of being a father. **Matt***

Time passes on, and we now have a lovely little girl. We know that we made the right decision. We still think of him on a daily basis, but not with the same agonizing pain. We put his ashes by a river and visit occasionally.

*I discovered that there is no league table for sorrow and suffering, and there is always someone in a worse situation. An extraordinary number of people have had miscarriages, stillbirths, genetic abnormalities etc and they were all able to help in small ways. **Robert***

*No easy answers I am afraid. Unusually for me, (and men!), I talked to many friends and neighbours and she didn't, except to our rather exceptional midwife. I had 2 boys to look after, which kept me busy but made life difficult. But life does go on, albeit slowly and the cliché about time healing came true. We had a baby girl 15 months afterwards, and that has helped. Keep talking to your wife if possible and don't give up there. Find other friends to talk to. It is amazing how many people have been through similar or repeated miscarriages, stillbirths etc. I read the ARC women's group posts on the forum for a long time which helped me get to grips with my wife's feelings. **Roger***

If you would like to join ARC's on line forum for bereaved men - email us at info@arc-uk.org

Books you may find helpful

A Silent Sorrow; Pregnancy Loss: Guidance and Support for You and Your Family,
I. Kohn, MSW and Perry-Lynn Moffitt, Routledge 2000.

Fathers feel too, Andrew Don, Bosun Publications, 2005.

The Courage to Grieve, Judy Tatelbaum, Heinemann, 1990.

When a Baby Dies, Nancy Kohner & Alix Henley, Routledge, 2001.

Empty Cradle, Broken Heart: Surviving the Death of Your Baby, Deborah L. Davis, Fulcrum, 1996

Useful organisations

ARC

www.arc-uk.org

Helpline: 0207 713 7486 info@arc-uk.org

SANDS (Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Charity)

<https://www.sands.org.uk/support/bereavement-support/sands-information-and-support-partners>

Helpline: 0808 164 3332 helpline@sands.org.uk

Child Bereavement UK

<https://childbereavementuk.org/>

Helpline: 0800 02 88840 support@childbereavementuk.org

Samaritans

116 123 jo@samaritans.org

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