

After the Loss: A Dad's Perspective on What Helps... and What Doesn't

By Robert Goyer

When our baby Carrick was born at 27 weeks gestational age and passed away a day-and-a-half later, I was devastated. Erika and I spent the next many weeks keeping our heads above water with work and the house—we didn't have any other kids to care for at the time—and we spent the rest of our time in bed, holding each other and crying a lot. Even after I was "better," for many months I'd be doing something completely unrelated to our loss and it would hit me, and I'd lose it, breaking down into gut wrenching sobbing without warning. Anyone who thinks dads don't mourn hasn't been there.



Dads desperately need support, though my experience was that not much gets directly offered. Maybe that's because many men are uncomfortable dealing with such deep and powerful feelings, and maybe it's because many of the men out there who have suffered a loss have yet to come to terms with it, which breaks my heart.

A lot of the support I got was reflected support, things intended for Erika but that touched me and helped me, too. We received a number of letters and notes from women who had lost a baby and who wanted us to know that they knew just what we were going through. We sat in bed, read those letters aloud and cried. It helped.

In my experience, there were things that helped me go through the process and things that did not.

Give permission for sadness. In many societies men are expected to be tough, to overcome heartache through their inner strength and toughness of character. This is not how it works. Dads need to feel as though it's okay for them to grieve. The truth is, there's no such thing as toughing it out. You either grieve or you put off grieving. There's no middle ground. I was (and am) lucky to have a spouse and a few good friends who got that from the get go.

It doesn't help to focus on "trying again." Several people, including one of the nurses in the NICU told me, after my baby had died in my arms, that we were young

and could try again. It was not what I wanted to hear. Carrick was not a generic baby who could be replaced by another baby. He was Carrick, and he was gone. Accept that and respect that.

Job Assistance is real help. It didn't make sense to me, but after we lost Carrick, most of the rest of the world went on as though nothing had happened. This, unfortunately, included my job. At the time I worked with my dad, and even though my loss meant a greatly increased burden for him for a couple of weeks, he shouldered it without a word. He couldn't talk about our baby; 20 years later, he still can't. Helping me with work helped him help me. How much people can help depends a lot on one's job situation. But you might be surprised at how much people want to do what they can.

Listening is crucial. After Carrick's death, I needed to talk, to let people know what I'd gone through, to let them know that I was hurting, that I was crushed inside. A few of my friends gave me that chance to talk, even though, never having gone through it themselves, they really didn't know what I was going through. It helped anyway.

Focus on the good. It might be hard to believe for those who have never been through it, but even after losing your baby, you still want to talk about the good things, the joy of finding out about the pregnancy, the expectations, the planning, the ultrasound pictures. Even the experience of holding the baby, for those who lucky enough to have had that experience, as I was. Remembering the good, taking pictures, keeping mementos all help focus on the good, even if it did last far too short a time.