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# Infant Loss & Bereavement: A Journey for Families and Health Care Professionals

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# Infant Loss & Bereavement- A Journey for Families and Health Care Professionals

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# Loss...

- Perinatal loss includes infertility during the preconception period, fetal death during pregnancy and infant death in the first year of life.
- Losing a wished-for child is startling and unexpected.
- Responses to this loss range from disappointment to life-changing anguish (Woods & Woods, 1997).

# Types of Loss

- Ectopic pregnancy
- Elective abortion
- Fetal death
- Infertility
- Miscarriage (spontaneous abortion)
- Neonatal death
- Stillbirth
- Sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS)
- Sudden unexplained death in infancy (SUID)
- Therapeutic abortion

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# Historical Perspective

- America's perspectives on death are evolving (SLOWLY...)
- Although losses in pregnancy and birth were seen as real possibilities in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, families still mourned these losses (Hoffert, 1989).
- Birth moved from the home to the hospital in the early 1900s.
- Pain relief efforts left women unaware of their pain and of actual birth, whether stillborn or live (Leavitt, 1986).
- The stage was set for hiding death from women and their families; a shroud of silence grew around perinatal death.



# Progress...

- Acknowledgement and integration of loss into care began slowly, but it has persevered.
- The need for this approach forms the basis for training for nurses, bereavement counselors and research into best-care practices.



# Theories of Attachment

- Klaus and Kennel (1976) describe behaviors that demonstrate a bond between mother and baby before birth.
- Peppers and Knapp (1980) show that attachment begins when planning a pregnancy.
- Bowlby (1969) was the first to identify and discuss human attachment.



# Rubin's Tasks of Pregnancy

- The mother: (Rubin, 1984)
  1. Ensures safe passage for self and baby
  2. Ensures social acceptance of self and baby
  3. Binds-in to the baby
  4. Gives of herself
- Rubin's framework helps nurses identify how women are affected when pregnancy tasks are incomplete.



# Pregnancy as a RITE of Passage

- Each rite of passage has three stages:
  1. Separation
  2. Transition
  3. Incorporation
- A woman separates herself from her old status when she announces her pregnancy
- The transition takes place during the 9 months of pregnancy

# Investment

- Ultrasound
- Genetic Testing
- Fetal Monitoring
- Elective termination

# Swanson's Theory of Caring

Through inductive analyses, Swanson (1991) identified five caring processes:

1. Knowing
2. Being with
3. Doing for
4. Enabling
5. Maintaining belief

The more we invest the more we care....



# The “Fetus” is a Person

- The issue of fetal personhood is complex with social, religious, legal and ethical dimensions.
- Bereaved parents have assigned some degree of personhood to their baby; therefore, their loss is real, for a real person who would have been a part of their life and their family (Côté-Arsenault & Dombeck, 2001).



# Tentative Pregnancy Anticipatory Grief

- Rothman (1986) found that women withheld their emotional bonds for the pregnancy and baby until after they received test results.
- Anticipatory grief is the preparation for death during or prior to an inevitable loss (Hynan, 1986; Rando, 1986), as opposed to grief after a loss.

# Grief and Bereavement

- **Grief** is an emotional response to the loss of something or someone held dear; it is the internal response to loss.
- **Mourning** is a public or external response to the death of a loved one.
- The period of time during which **grief and mourning** occur after a death is **called bereavement**.



# Grief and Bereavement cont....

- No two people respond to the same event or loss in exactly the same way; grief is individual and depends on how loss affects each person.
- Intense and continued distress symptoms beyond 6 months to 1 year that interfere with one's ability to function and enjoy life should be evaluated by a mental health professional (Morrow, 2009).
- While severity of loss is often related to the stage of pregnancy when loss is experienced, this is not always the case.

# Normal Grief Reaction

- Anger
- Sadness
- Numbness
- Aching Arms
- Guilt/ "what if ? "
- Ruminating
- Bargaining
- Isolation or fear of being alone
- Dreams
- Wanting to end the event or prolong it



# Be aware of

- Anger, frustration, or resentment of existing children
- Suicidal ideation
- Poor or non-existent support network
- High-risk home environment
- Prior history of loss
- \*\*True lack of acceptance of loss\*\*
- History of high risk behaviors

# How we handle the initial news is critical to grief formation & bereavement

- Shapes parent's experience forever
- Can have lasting impact on younger children
- Normalizing and being present is Important
- Be aware of gender differences in grief
- Age appropriate for children
- Empower planning, control, and participation whenever possible
- Help parents anticipate what's coming
- Things to say and not to say

# Readiness

- For grief materials
- To discuss options (know what they are)
- To hold the baby, or not
- To receive visitors & phone calls
- Offer chaplain/ prayer/baptism
- Photos & mementos
- Emphasis on self- preservation
- Encourage acceptance of help

# Personal Awareness

- Your own history with Loss
- How comfortable or not are you with discussing
- Personal emotional triggers
- The art of Presence



# Resources

- [www.bereavementservices.org](http://www.bereavementservices.org)
- <http://www.childrensdayton.org/cms/bereavement>
- <https://www.nowilaymedowntosleep.org>
- [www.babylosscomfort.com/grief-resources/e-cards](http://www.babylosscomfort.com/grief-resources/e-cards)
- Faces of Loss Support Group (See handout)
- Shades of Blue Support Group ( MVH uses)

