

Professionally Speaking...

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Red Flag Days

Soon after the death of your baby you may begin to feel some anxiety and sadness in anticipation of special dates that loom in the future. One date that is very difficult for parents is the baby's due date, which is the date your baby was expected to be born. When a baby is born pre-term, then the due date will be full of disappointment for what should have been a joyful day. The first due date after your loss is the most difficult, so it is wise to plan an activity to honor the baby that was expected to come into this world on that date. Some parents choose to go to the shore or another vacation spot to find peace and solitude, while others may want to distract themselves from their sadness by doing something fun. It is up to you to do what comforts you the most.

Babies that are born at the cusp of viability (approximately 24 weeks), or those that have life limiting anomalies may only live for a few hours or days. Their date of death may be days or weeks after their birth date. In this case, you will have a separate birth date and death date. If you learn of your baby's death at a routine prenatal appointment when the doctor cannot find a heartbeat, you may not be certain of the exact date that your baby died. In this case, the date that the baby is born is considered to be his/her birth date, and no death date is noted. Some parents refer to this date as the "angelversary" of their baby – the day their baby became an angel.

Every birthday marks one more year that you are living without your baby. Each year marks a milestone in which your hopes and dreams for your child are unfulfilled. Seeing other children who are the same age that your child would have been can be very hurtful. Parents have shared with me some helpful ways in which they honor these special dates. Doing something peaceful as a couple or family, such as going to the beach or a park is a way to respectfully remember your baby. To celebrate their baby's birthday, parents sometimes like to make a cake and share it with family members who support them in their grief. If there is a cemetery in which the baby is buried, bringing balloons, small toys, or cupcakes to the grave can be healing. Another idea is to create a memorial garden at your home and decorate it in a special way on that date. One of the moms in my support group bakes cupcakes and puts them in her memorial garden. She doesn't even seem to mind when the squirrels eat them! Parents may even feel sad on their own birthdays because their child is not with them to celebrate.

Mother's Day and Father's Day are two of the hardest days. It's difficult to wrap your head around the fact that you are still a parent, but your baby is in Heaven. On these holidays that celebrate parenthood, your arms are empty and it is especially painful. You are the parent of an Angel Baby.

Holidays such as Christmas and Thanksgiving always cause a lot of anticipatory grief, which can begin months before the holidays occur. While your family and friends are occupied with holiday festivities, your baby seems to be forgotten, causing even more grief for you. There are many ways that you can honor your baby during these times, such as lighting a candle or hanging a special ornament on your tree in their memory.

I've just mentioned the most common special days that will bring a grief reaction. However, until recently I did not know that parents had grief reactions to days that never occurred to me! One mother shared with me that her husband was crushed by the prospect of spending Superbowl Sunday without his baby. In his mind, his baby would be born in December and he was looking forward to sitting in front of the TV with his new baby on his lap, while watching the football game. His expectation of sharing that day with his new son was shattered. This is not a typical day that I would expect a parent to feel the pain of the loss, but it was for this particular dad. This revelation taught me a big lesson!

I began to imagine specific occasions that are part of the hopes and dreams of parents that begin as soon as you learn that you are pregnant. Think of all the visions that you have of being a parent. There may be hundreds of dreams that are dashed when a baby dies, and those dreams are as individual as you are. I'd like to share an example with you.

Moms and dads imagine what fun it will be to bring their baby to family gatherings, only to feel like a failure when all of their siblings have children, and they don't. Family gatherings are now events to be dreaded. There are many big things and little things that you dream of doing with your child that are crushed when you have a loss. I've come to realize that it is not only the Hallmark holidays that are difficult.

Parents often tell me that the anticipation of the day is usually worse than the day itself. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that even everyday events can tug at your heart strings if you had your heart set on enjoying them with your baby. It is important to recognize that the painful feelings surrounding these special dates are a normal and a healthy part of your grief journey. It hurts so much because you love your baby so much!