

Bereavement Support for the Family Suffering the Death of an Infant

Tip:

The clinician's response to the family can influence how family members recover from this tragic experience. The family needs clear and accurate information, as well as psychosocial support.

The Family Grieving Process

- Individuals and families respond differently to grief. There are no correct ways for the family to deal with their grief.
- *It is of tremendous value to them if you as a professional acknowledge and validate their grief.* Do not assume how they will react or what they will do based on ethnicity, race or religion. Give the family the chance to let you know what they need.

Informing the Family about the Infant's Death

- It is not the clinician's role to determine or discuss the cause and manner of death if it is sudden and unexplained. It is difficult not to be able to provide this for the family, but that is strictly the role of the Medical Examiner or Coroner.
- Clinicians can assist the family by providing the context for an autopsy—why it is done, who does it, who pays for it, why the cause of death may never be known and may be reported as “undetermined”, how the results will be used.
- The clinician can offer to meet with the parents to discuss and interpret the autopsy results, once the final diagnosis has been made.

The Family's Need to Say Goodbye to Their Child

- **When the death occurs in the hospital:** Take time to sit with the family while they express their emotions in tears, or anger, or silence. Refer to the baby by name. Listen to their pain and sadness without hurrying to make them feel better or “fix” things for them. Allow the family to say goodbye to their child in their own way. Offer the family the opportunity to hold the baby, take pictures, keep a piece of clothing or blanket as a memento, pray. When they are ready to give the baby to the nurses, tell them what will happen next. Assure them that the baby's body will be treated with kindness and respect. Offer them a referral for additional bereavement support.
- **When the death occurs at home or other settings:** Help the family understand the role of various professionals (i.e. medical and legal) in obtaining information about the infant's death. Ask them what they want to know about how the baby died, and provide what medical information you can. For questions regarding Death Scene Investigation; Doll Reenactment; and the Sudden Unexplained Infant Death Investigation Report Form (SUIDIRF), refer them to other key personnel (i.e. law enforcement, coroner, etc. as appropriate to the location of the death). Offer them a referral for additional bereavement support.

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- **After the cause of death has been determined:** When you are discussing the death with the family, make sure that the family understands all of the words you are using: SIDS; Sudden Infant Death; Crib Death, etc.

Follow-up & self-care:

- Encourage the family to follow-up with you or someone you have referred them to for counseling. Many families will not have the emotional strength to reach out for help. Identify local grief or counseling resources and make the referral for them.
- As a clinician, you also need to take care of yourself. Pay special attention to boundary issues and what the experience has evoked in you. Take advantage of opportunities to debrief with advisors and colleagues to deepen your clinical understanding and expertise in dealing with infant death.

Resources

- *Bereavement Counseling for Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) and Infant Mortality: Core Competencies for the Health Care Professional* (May 2004). Contact The Association of SIDS & Infant Mortality Programs: (800) 930-7437 or www.asip1.org.
- The National SIDS & Infant Death Project IMPACT: Contacts for state programs to find professional bereavement counselors, support groups and resources for safe sleep environments. (800) 930-7437; www.sidsprojectimpact.com.



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The Association of Clinicians for the Underserved (ACU) is a non-profit, transdisciplinary organization of health professionals, advocates, and health care organizations united in a common mission to improve the health of America's underserved populations and to enhance the development and support of the health care clinicians serving these populations.



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The National SIDS & Infant Death Project IMPACT, a partnership of the Association of SIDS & Infant Mortality Programs and the federal Maternal and Child Health Bureau, creates opportunities for collaboration among federal, state and local organizations in response to SIDS/ID risk reduction and bereavement support issues.