our own sense of loss. The main point here, of course, is that if this is ignored or repressed it can lead to family resentments . . . but if it is faced and shared, it can provide strength to both parents and grandparents and can . . . deepen relationships within the family.

11

Friends and Relatives

Helping the Bereaved

In a Baoulé village in West Africa a death has occurred. Relatives and friends gather quickly from surrounding villages, and as they arrive they all greet the bereaved family with the word Nyako. The word is repeated many times by the visitors, and the family responds, "Nyako." The men gather in a circle, and individuals rise to recite words of comfort, beginning and ending with Nyako. The mourners again respond, "Nyako."

In contrast to the Baoulé and many other cultures, Americans have no prescribed words to express their sympathy after a death occurs. Even when there are set rituals—a funeral, a wake—most Americans are uncomfortable with people who have experienced a death. We have no phrases to convey the feelings of solidarity and compassion in the face of loss. And yet it is the support of others, family and friends, that eases the isolation and anguish of bereavement.

Dr. Glenn Vernon, author of *Sociology of Death,* asked 1,500 college students what they would do if they met someone who had recently lost a loved one. Only twenty-five percent said they would mention the death. Forty percent said they would rather the other person brought up the subject. And another twenty-five percent preferred that the death not be mentioned at all. The remainder had no idea what they would do.

This study showed the feeling in a clearly defined bereavement situation. But when a pregnancy ends in tragedy, friends and relatives are even more uncertain about what to do. Too often, therefore, they say the wrong thing or nothing at all. The whole situation is confusing. Is it or is it not a tragedy? Should the parents be treated as though they had "lost a loved one"? What others often do not realize is that a major tragedy has occurred—probably the worst so far in the life of a young adult.

In other mourning situations, the bereaved often help their friends who are uncomfortable by directing the conversation. But in this case even the parents themselves are not really sure how to act. How do you grieve for someone who existed mostly in mental images and perhaps in internal movements? Their experience is filled with contradictions and ambiguities. For instance, if it was the first pregnancy, they wonder: are they parents or aren't they?

Parents who are mourning for their infant receive a strong message from society that their loss is not significant. Sad, yes—but not really a tragedy. "At least you have other children," people say. Or "Well, you can always have another one." The comments of others may make a bereaved parent begin to question his or her own feelings and then try to tailor them to the perceived expectations of others. As one mother said after her child was stillborn:

> Sometimes I felt proud of myself for seeming strong and being able to talk about it without breaking down. I didn't want people to pity me. And then I would worry about whether people would think I was callous. And when I did cry, I worried that I seemed overly emotional.

It is not easy for the bereaved to discover for themselves what their genuine feelings are rather than what they are supposed to feel. But they know that their tragedy is real, that they are in pain.

At times it seems hard to communicate this pain because there is simply no appropriate language with which to describe the tragedy. For parents of a stillborn child, for example, to speak about "the day our baby died" is terribly difficult when it was also "the day our baby was born." The cause of so much anguish is thus reduced to "it"—"the day *it* happened."

The baby is also often referred to as "it." Even when parents have given a name to the dead infant, they rarely use the name in conversation. Was the infant a person or only an "it"? When there is no name, when the child's sex is not even known—most likely with a miscarriage or ectopic pregnancy and sometimes with selective abortion—it is even harder for parents to verbalize their sense of having lost a baby.

Referring to the infant by name, when there was a name, helps the bereaved parents acknowledge the reality of their loss. Some parents are surprised at how helpful this is:

> A friend asked if we had named our stillborn baby. After telling her the name, we both began referring to the baby by her name, Sarah. It felt so good to call her a name.

> When we chose the name Jonathan before the birth of our son, I thought I wouldn't use the shorter versions of the name. However, in the hospital, people referred to him by nicknames. They always talked about Jonny, or asked me how Jon was. I was pleased to hear these names. He sounded like a real person even though he had so many problems and was dying.

Problems in communicating with others about the tragedy arise almost immediately after the event. How is one going to break the news? There was anticipation of a joyful announcement; instead there is now an unexpected report of tragedy. Carefully prepared announcement cards become useless. Instead there is awkwardness, embarrassment, sadness, and anger:

> I knew my parents were waiting eagerly for the news of the birth of their first grandchild. I waited more than a day before I had the courage to call and tell them that she was born but would probably not survive.

> People called and asked, "Have you had your baby yet?" I would always hesitate, I didn't know what to answer. Usually I'd say, "Yes and no." Yes because we had the baby and no because we didn't. One friend who lived in another town called a month later, bubbling with cheerfulness. Her first words were, "What kind of baby did you have?" I couldn't help feeling mad, even though she had no way to know. All I could think to say was, "A dead one."

In many situations, friends are not even aware there was a pregnancy. If a woman miscarries early or if the expectant parents live at a distance from relatives and friends, they wonder how to convey two pieces of news at once. Can others understand the importance of the loss of a baby whose existence was unknown to them?

The mother who carries a baby, knowing she will soon have an abortion because she has learned of deformities or knowing that the infant is already dead, faces an excruciating few days or weeks. Every time she leaves her home, people congratulate her and ask when the child is due. Friends also ask the father about the progress of the expected infant. Every question about the baby is painful for the bereaved. Should they tell the truth?

Some parents find it easier if someone else informs others for them:

> I found it such a relief that my neighbors who knew I was expecting a baby were told about the death right away by someone else. Then I didn't have to worry about calling people to let them know. By the time I came home, they were all prepared with food and flowers for me.

While this is very helpful for some parents, others prefer to tell friends themselves. Breaking the news is a way the bereaved parents can begin to talk about their feelings to others and make the event "real" to themselves. This may explain the resentment felt by one father after his baby died:

> I returned to work soon after our son was stillborn and realized that the whole office knew. I discovered my mother had called my secretary to tell her. I was furious—I felt she was doing something behind my back that I would have preferred to do myself.

Although it can be hard to speak to others about the event, communication is an essential part of the healing process. Whether the news is conveyed initially by the parents or by someone else, it is the continuation of the dialogue over the months and even the years that follow which is most important.

Maintaining the dialogue is difficult for both the parents and their friends and relatives:

> I felt that when I talked about our experience people were very threatened by it, so I stopped mentioning it even though I really wanted to talk.

> With someone I knew well, I was anxious to talk about it, but the pain was so deep that it was very difficult. So I had mixed feelings about it, and no one encouraged me to talk.

A very strained situation may occur when good friends of the bereaved parents are expecting a baby or already have young children, especially one around the same age theirs would have been. Parents react in different ways to this. Some isolate themselves, afraid they will be thought of as a jinx. Some, however, try very hard to preserve their friendship but find difficulties:

> My best friend was reluctant to visit me when she knew she would have to bring her baby. I wanted her to visit and feel comfortable, so I tried to act like it didn't bother me. I took pictures of the baby and asked about his progress. After a while she began to relax about it and then really got into talking about him a lot. This was very painful for me. I felt like she had forgotten what happened to me, but I didn't know how to tell her. It wasn't until after my next child was born that we finally talked about it. It would have been better if we had cleared the air sooner.

The bereaved parents' need for the comfort and support of others is enormous. But all too often they feel they must isolate themselves or hide their feelings.

The father's feelings are especially likely to be misunderstood. Some people assume that the tragedy happened only to the mother. Friends and family may forget that the man is not just the partner of a grieving mother, he is also a bereaved parent. One father expressed resentment at being excluded:

> All during childbirth classes and labor and delivery, husbands are secondary. So it wasn't surprising that I was ignored when something went wrong. People asked, "How is your wife?" They never thought to ask how I was.

The father may feel that he must act in control and concentrate on cheering up his wife. He may find it difficult to express his emotions openly to others, and they in turn often find it awkward to ask him how he is feeling.

Mother and father both need to feel that others are sensitive to their anguish and share the sense of loss. They need to be able to discuss their feelings, to express the anger, the guilt, the sense of failure. They need to be reassured that their feelings are legitimate, that they are going through a normal grieving process. They need to repeat conversations, to be constantly reassured, to have someone who will listen to the same details again and again.

There are times when they need to talk about other things, to feel, even for a brief time, that life goes on normally and that they are just like everyone else. And there are times when the smallest gestures are the most appreciated—a call, a note, an invitation to lunch, a jigsaw puzzle for distraction, an offer to help with cleaning or care of other children.

Some parents mentioned a particular incident that touched them:

> When Joan came to visit I mentioned that the doctor was worried that I hadn't had a bowel movement yet. Not long after she left, the doorbell rang, and there she was with a huge jar of stewed prunes. That was my first laugh. It was such a thoughtful idea.

As helpful as they may try to be, friends and relatives who are unfamiliar with the experience of bereavement may simply not be able to comprehend what the parents are feeling. Many bereaved parents, therefore, seek out people who have had experiences like their own. Family and friends may help by offering to put them in touch with other bereaved parents or with organized support groups such as those listed in the Appendix of this book.

A difficult dilemma for friends and relatives arises when they are asked for their opinion or when, unasked, they believe the parents need some advice. This situation may arise, for example, when a baby's condition is uncertain and a second medical

opinion could be helpful or when a couple must decide whether to terminate a pregnancy after learning that their baby will not be normal. If parents are trying to decide about a funeral or are thinking of suing the physician, they may seek advice. Or a friend may believe that a parent having great difficulty in recovering from the event needs professional counseling.

Even when family and friends are aware of a need for help, their own fears of dealing with grief and dying may make it difficult for them to be of assistance. Some rationalize their inaction by saying, "We are not needed. . . . They want to be alone. . . . This is not our business. . . ." Some do not want to become involved, or don't know how, and some are afraid of the consequences if they do.

It is especially difficult when decisions that may affect the parents for the rest of their lives have to be made quickly. One man reflected on the conflict he felt when his sister asked for advice about having an abortion after she had just learned her baby would never be normal:

> It was too big a decision for me to make. I had nothing to lose in the situation since I was a third party and not responding from the viewpoint of having to be the parent of this child. Clearly if she decided not to have the abortion because of the advice I had given, and the baby turned out to be an incredible burden on her, she would have resented me for the rest of her life. I did not say anything because I did not want to hurt her.

At the time of critical decision-making, parents may not be aware of all the options available to them. Sometimes others can be most helpful simply by gathering the information necessary for making the best possible decision and by reviewing with the family all the positive and negative aspects of each option.

The efforts of others to be comforting may occasionally have a negative effect. Those who hope to erase the pain by minimizing the loss, for instance, are usually unsuccessful:

> A friend came to see me at the hospital. She said, "Well, I'm very sorry, but after all it's for the best, since you wouldn't want the baby to grow up and be sick and then die. It's better that it

> happens now and not later." It was a very heartless thing for her to say, and it upset me more than anything anybody else had said.

The temptation to try to find something positive in the tragic event, while understandable, is rarely appreciated. The woman who is told that she will be a better mother for having had this experience, for example, can only wonder how that is possible, as she is likely to feel that she will be a more anxious mother.

The comments from people who seem to have forgotten, even momentarily, often hurt the most. As time goes by, others may seem to forget the experience altogether, and thoughtless remarks may increase:

> About six months after our baby died, I was talking with my cousin about a friend's response to her new baby. She said, "When you have your first child, you'll understand." I thought to myself, "What do you think I had?" She caught herself and tried to correct her comment, but clearly she had forgotten for the moment.

Even immediately after the tragedy occurs, there are people who say nothing at all, who act as if nothing happened. Studies of parents after newborn loss find that this "conspiracy of silence" is typical and that it is upsetting to most parents. The parents' grief is therefore frequently compounded by hurt feelings and anger toward those they care about:

> A number of friends never called or mentioned our tragedy. Even some who came to see us managed to avoid mentioning the subject completely. When I returned to work, many people said nothing to me about the baby, as if nothing had happened. And some of these were people with whom I had talked a lot about my pregnancy. If I said anything about what had happened, I felt it made people uncomfortable. My disappointment and anger at others was at times even greater than my grief. I found that I was reevaluating my friendships based on how well people came through for me.

Negative encounters often damage relationships with one's family and friends, with the result that grief over the loss may be

made worse by a growing isolation from others. The pain of bereavement is severe enough without the added burden of anger and strained relationships.

Sometimes family members and friends who do not respond feel they are being helpful by doing nothing. Perhaps they are told by someone, or they tell others, to refrain from calling the bereaved parents so as not to upset them. But the parents may wonder why no one seems to care. Other family members or friends fear that any mention of the tragedy may revive the pain and that talking about other subjects would be a helpful distraction. One woman remembers:

> When I had my miscarriage, I told a good friend about it, and he quickly changed the subject. I was hurt and disappointed until his wife told me later that he had been upset but thought I wouldn't want to talk about it.

The parents may, in fact, be ambivalent about discussing a subject so laden with sadness and therefore may unconsciously give others an unspoken message that they do not want to dwell on it. They may expect some discomfort and deliberately lead conversations in other directions; then, afterward, they wonder why the friend had not talked about their grief. Understanding one's own needs and then communicating them to others can facilitate the recovery process for the bereaved and also help others to provide the most appropriate support.

Bereaved parents who confront the friends who disappointed them are relieved when they understand what the friends' intentions were. They begin to realize how difficult it is for other people to face and discuss grief and that silence does not necessarily mean a lack of caring and concern. Discussion also helps by reminding the parents of the awkwardness they themselves probably felt in the past when responding to the grief of others.

Friends and relatives who listen and react with understanding, who console and distract, are cherished by bereaved parents. Existing relationships may be strengthened when there is a deepened appreciation of others' affection and helpfulness. New friendships may develop with people who were not previously close but who provided a special word or action at the right moment. And those who realize that the need for support lasts a long time, and who are there to offer it, are the ones who help make it possible to go on.

IV
PUBLIC ISSUES