

## **A Mother's Pain.**

Written by Lynne Schulz, published 16/03/09  
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Infant loss is not only a painful experience, but one of life's tragedies. Parents do not expect to bury their child. Society has taught us that it should be the other way round. In a perfect world our children outlive us. They are the ones who suffer the pain and grief of saying "goodbye", yet thousands of families each year suffer the emotional pain of having to do the unexpected.

I am a multiple birth loss mother. This sentence often invokes a sense of pity from those to whom I have uttered it. Their words cease, their eyes drop and there is an uncertainty as to what to say next. However, I have spent many years trying to understand the positive side of this tragedy. I do not want pity. My time of grieving has finished. I want understanding, support and to be told that I am a survivor - just like my surviving twin son. I do not want to be branded as 'brave', 'courageous' or even a 'pioneer' in the work that I endeavour to do to improve multiple birth loss education.

My background places me in quite a quandary. The research that I have carried out during the past sixteen years takes me into the world of the health care professional; Doctors, Obstetricians and Midwives. Who am I to tell these people what to do or what to say, yet here I am, trying to expand their minds and introduce them into a world that many of them will never fully comprehend.

When my twin daughter died in 1990 no one was sure how to handle my situation. Many people thought it best to focus on my surviving twin son, thinking it would create a more positive atmosphere and shorten my grieving experience. However, in trying to pretend that something bad did not happen by focusing solely upon the good, life lost its balance. Keeping the 'balance' is the key to helping bereaved parents and their surviving offspring to cope. Ironically after all these years, many people still don't understand and continue to follow worn out paths of ignorant advice-giving, and empty and hollow words of support.

It is not within the scope of this article to try and explain the intricacies of multiple birth loss. Much documented evidence has already been published to do just that. The aim of this article is to provide some basic, common-sense approaches to starting that all-important understanding that I have already mentioned.

As a multiple birth loss mother I wish to share some general answers to questions that are often asked by those with enquiring minds.

### **What is the 'right' thing to say to a multiple birth loss parent?**

Saying that things are 'alright' is not a good start. Reminding bereaved families that it's good that 'at least' they have some surviving children is not a positive way in trying to lessen their pain. In fact, it does the opposite and exacerbates the emotional pain by

ignoring the child, (or children) who have died. It denies those who have died an identity and reveals the imbalance of how society treats older people who have died with more respect than those who were less fortunate and passed away at a much earlier age.

### **What is wrong with trying to focus on the living rather than the dead?**

Surviving multiple birth children who have lost their siblings early in life, such as during the pregnancy or shortly after birth, seem to suffer the greatest trauma. They struggle to find their own identity within a mostly singleton world, feeling isolated, lost and alone without their 'wombmate'. Research has revealed that surviving twins for example, who were not told of their twinship found it hard to understand why they had difficulty in forming and maintaining long term relationships. It is not uncommon to hear stories of survivors turning to drugs and alcohol as a means of escape and many have required professional counselling or in extreme cases, psychiatric care.

Mothers who have been told to not tell their survivors the truth struggle to maintain a most painful secret. Living with a survivor, especially if the child is an identical twin, can be a constant daily reminder of their loss, and some mothers have been noted to have mistreated their surviving twins, blaming them for the unfortunate situation. Several years ago I worked with a medical professional in assisting a woman who tried to keep her 'secret' for many years. Eventually though, the 'secret' came out, albeit accidentally, during a family get-together. The mother did not receive any family support and was treated with contempt at having broken the cardinal rule of speaking the truth. This particular woman required intensive psychiatric care to firstly, work through the many years of pent-up grief, and secondly, assistance to communicate with her surviving twin so that the shock of the discovery could be dealt with without too many major ramifications.

### **Women can always have more babies. What's the problem with losing just one?**

This is an extremely insensitive and hurtful comment. Babies are not commodities which can be purchased off the shelf like cereal in a supermarket! With a rapidly aging population, our society sees many women putting off childbearing until much later in life. This creates fertility problems and it is not uncommon for women in their forties to become reliant upon fertility drugs and IVF programmes. This alone adds to the increase in multiple births. Therefore after years of emotional and financial expense in trying to conceive a child, to be told to 'just go out and have another one', is not only cruel, but a very ignorant view of a most complex problem.

Women who bear children within a multiple pregnancy are often treated like a dog who has given birth to a litter of pups. Family, friends and health care professionals, in their feeble attempts to console the bereaved mother, try and explain that because there are still living children, it doesn't really matter if one has died. In answer to that I will often ask the parent who has several singleton children to go home and decide which one you would like to have 'put down'.

Therefore, it is acknowledged that maternal loss is a most devastating and tragic experience. It is also acknowledged that families who have a surviving child within a multiple pregnancy

loss situation are blessed to have a survivor to love, care for and raise. Having said that, all multiple pregnancy loss families want is to be treated as fairly as their singleton counterparts, but to also remind those who care for them that multiple birth loss deals with life and death, and the short term experiences of these families will have long term ramifications for many years ahead. That's why education is so important. We need to equip these families and health care professionals in how to give our survivors hope of a positive and productive future.