

Older loss

It's never too late to find support

red
nose



Up until the 1980s – 1990s, hospital staff believed that if parents were allowed to see their baby who had died and establish a connection, their grief would be more intense.

As a result, most parents were not allowed to see or hold their baby who had died.

In a state of shock, some parents were initially relieved that they did not have to come face-to-face with their heartbreaking reality. Others wanted to see their baby but were too scared to challenge the process – this was not a time when people questioned authority. If parents did ask to see their baby, most requests were denied.

In most cases, information was withheld from parents, and they were sent home without any record of their baby's existence. They were not provided with an opportunity to arrange a funeral or offered support to help them with their grief. The hospital usually organised the burial in an unmarked communal grave and to this day many parents still do not know where their baby is buried.

Although these hospital practices were done with the best intentions, it is now understood that they often caused emotional damage to bereaved parents.

“At the time, we accepted what we were told – we didn't know what else we could do. But my wife and I have been grieving for our son all this time. We were never at peace.”

- Ross

“Before I got my records, thinking of my baby's time alive filled me with such sadness. But now I understand that many professionals tried to save her. It brings me peace, knowing that others cared about her. I read the records often.”

- Barbara

New attitudes and awareness

It may be some small consolation for these parents to know that hospital staff are now aware of the need to have parents' loss and grief acknowledged.

Because of the lobbying and advocacy work of Sands (now part of Red Nose), the Australian hospital system underwent comprehensive policy changes in the 1980s and 1990s. These changes transformed the way bereaved parents were cared for at the time of their baby's death.

Unspoken Grief

Every day we receive calls from parents who experienced the death of their baby many years (and sometimes decades) ago. Many of these parents did not have the opportunity to see, hold, or make memories with their baby. Some have not begun to grieve their loss until many years later.

This can be a confronting, confusing and isolating time. If this is your experience, be reassured that you are not alone.

Know that these feelings are perfectly valid, whatever they are. You are not alone. A loss may be many years ago, it is never too late to make a connection with your child. These processes may help bring about a sense of connection, relief, and begin to help you move through your grief.

Red Nose can provide you with support no matter how long ago your baby died. We can also provide practical assistance in navigating hospital or cemetery records to help you find out what may have happened to your baby after they died and where their remains may be located.

A good first step is to get in touch with Red Nose and start the conversation with someone who understands.



There are ways to locate information about your baby

For parents, finding the burial place of their baby is often the main goal. Many thought their baby's birth was not officially documented and that there would be no burial record. However, many of these births were recorded. Parents who have located these records have found them to be a huge source of comfort, as they provide physical proof that their baby existed. In some cases, these records have also helped parents to trace where their baby is buried.

The Hospital

Contact the hospital where your baby was born and ask them about the possibility of accessing your baby's medical records. Because babies weren't always given their own records, you might also like to try to access your own (in some instances the baby's paperwork has been stored with the mother's record).

You may need to make a written application. Ask the hospital what their process is.

If you had your baby at a hospital that has since closed, call the health department in your state or territory – they should know which facility took over the records.

Also be aware that medical records may have been lost or destroyed in the time since your baby was born, or that records may not contain burial details. In this case, it may be possible to find out which cemetery the hospital was using for communal burials at that particular time. Again, if the hospital no longer exists, try your state government's health department.

Cemetery records

For records that may have been lost, some families have been able to find their little one's burial place by searching these records. Funeral directors located near the hospital where you gave birth may also be able to help, because they may have buried other deceased babies from that hospital.

For many bereaved parents, finding their baby's burial site has been a sad experience, as they were distressed by the location or type of grave they found. Some parents were upset that they could not move their baby to a private grave. While each cemetery has different rules, it may be possible to arrange a personal plaque for your baby.

Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages

You may want to contact the registry in the state or territory in which your baby was born, to seek advice and to clarify how you may be able to request a search for any possible registration for your baby. It may be that the birth was registered and, if so, the registry will have specific policies relating to accessing those records, some of which may also provide burial details.

Unfortunately, not all parents (especially those whose babies died very long ago) can find where their baby is buried.

If you cannot find your records there are still ways to remember your little one.

Although you will always remember your baby, below are some suggestions for those who may wish to create more memories.

Obtain certificates

In some cases, parents who have tracked their baby's documentation have been successful in dealing with the Registry to have their baby's birth registered. Once the birth is registered, they were then able to get a birth certificate issued. If you wish to pursue that option you must contact the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages in the state your baby was born.

Red Nose also has 'In Memory' activities throughout the year. If you are interested, it is recommended you join the FREE Heart Strings program rednose.org.au/heartstrings

Establish an annual ritual

Some parents visit a special place, bake a cake or blow bubbles to acknowledge their baby. You may like to attend an organised remembrance service for babies that have died, such as those held by Red Nose.

“I remember crying to my husband and saying, ‘How could we let our baby go without holding her and telling her that we loved her?’ ”

- Lynne



Hold a memorial service

This could be at a cemetery, a place of worship (perhaps there is one in the hospital where your baby was born), your home or any other special place.

Create an album of mementos

This could include medical appointments and records, certificates, photos of the gravesite or a copy of the page in the cemetery register with your baby's burial details.

Make a personal tribute

For example:

- plant a special tree in your garden
- have a sketch or portrait done to represent your baby
- place a memorial notice in the paper on the anniversary of your baby's death
- donate money or a gift in your baby's memory
- write a letter or poem to your baby

“ For years I had nothing to show that I had lost twins. I now have a birth certificate and a stillbirth registration. I also have a plaque on their plot at the cemetery, two special necklaces and a locket in memory of them.”

- Maureen

Where to go for more help

Remember that you are not alone in this experience. Many parents find talking with other parents who have had a baby die, like a Red Nose volunteer parent supporter, to be very helpful.

Acknowledgements

This booklet was written in consultation with parents whose babies died many years ago. Red Nose is grateful to these families for the courage and generosity they have shown through sharing their stories and providing feedback.

We also acknowledge previous state-based Sands (now part of Red Nose) literature, from which this new fact sheet has evolved. Thank you also to Professor Paul Monagle, for his help in the development of this resource.

Disclaimer

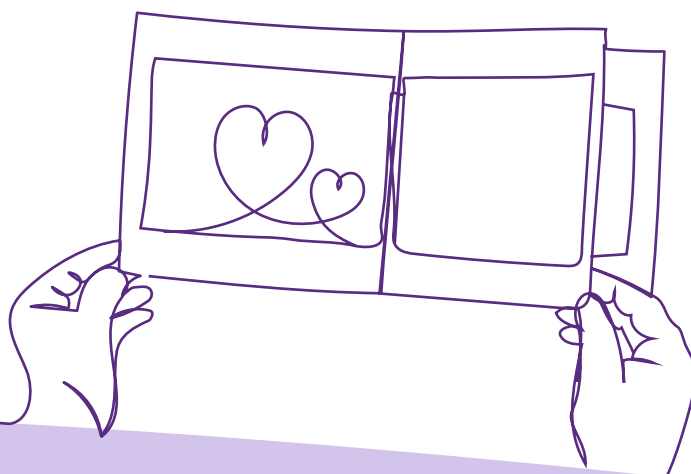
In this booklet we describe experiences that are common for parents whose babies died many years ago. The suggestions we provide are guided by our research and experience in helping families in this situation.

Red Nose acknowledges that values and beliefs surrounding death vary across cultures, religions and personal backgrounds.

Reactions to the death of a baby are unique. Some responses may not be included in this booklet, while some of the offered suggestions may not suit everyone. However, Red Nose offers information and support without judgement.

Professionals have reviewed the information contained in this booklet. It is provided in goodwill, as a public service. However, Red Nose makes no representation or warranty as to the accuracy, completeness or appropriateness of the information, in respect of which readers should make their own enquiries.

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To get in contact with the **Red Nose Older Loss Group** call 1300 998 698

Red Nose Bereavement Support Services for anyone who has been affected by the loss of a pregnancy, stillbirth, baby and child death

24/7 Support Line 1300 308 307

support@rednose.org.au

Support Library rednosegriefandloss.org.au