

A REVISED AND UPDATED EDITION

# WHEN PREGNANCY FAILS

*Families Coping with Miscarriage,  
Ectopic Pregnancy,  
Stillbirth, and Infant Death*

**Susan Borg and Judith Lasker**



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In memory of

Daniel Borg, December 25, 1978–January 9, 1979

and

Elana Lasker Siegel, June 24, 1978

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## *About the Revised Edition*

Eight years have passed since we wrote the original version of this book, eight years that have brought many changes into our lives. As we read over again what we wrote then, it is hard for us to believe that two tiny babies whose deaths inspired those words would now be almost ten years old. Yet we often imagine how different our lives would be now if they were alive.

During those eight years, medical information and technology have continued to change. New legal precedents and national policies have been set which affect many parents. Fortunately, there is a great deal more support for bereaved families now, both within the medical care system and through parent support groups. All of these changes are reflected in this new edition. Rather than simply add a new introduction or conclusion, we have rewritten each chapter as needed. In addition, a new chapter has been added on ectopic pregnancy because of the lack of information about this important and growing tragedy. The references and appendices are updated to reflect the vastly increased number of articles, organizations, and resources now available. In a new section at the end of the book, we have summarized results from a large follow-up study of bereaved families which was based on the conclusions of the first edition. Funded by The National Institutes of Health, this study gives strong scientific support to the significance for parents of a loss in pregnancy.

Eight years, many changes. But the feelings we described in this book have not changed. Grief is a universal human response, a painful reaction to loss that needs to be expressed. Hundreds of bereaved parents and caring professionals have shared their feelings with us over these past years and have confirmed the validity of what is expressed here. We are grateful for their openness and their insights. We hope that this new book will continue to be a comprehensive resource for parents who suffer the terrible loss of a baby and for all those who seek to help them.

## *Foreword*

As I contemplated how best to introduce the reader to this book's compelling and important subject, I decided it would be wise to use the words and experiences of bereaved parents. They, like the authors, are in the best position to describe how parents feel after a miscarriage, selective abortion, stillbirth, or infant death.

For years I have attended the monthly meetings of a group of parents whose babies died without even leaving the hospital. Over the years the composition of this group changed, but the themes expressed at meeting after meeting are fairly constant. At one meeting, the parents were discussing how difficult it was to have others appreciate what they are going through and listen to them as they struggled through weeks and months of excruciating and painful grief reactions. One mother said, "I feel like throwing open my bedroom window and shouting out to the world: 'My baby has died! My baby has died!'" The other parents nodded in agreement. These parents discussed the need for a visible sign to the world, such as wearing a black armband or placing a black wreath on their door, that would let everyone know what had happened to them. These signs might give parents the understanding and support they desperately need for many months after their loss.

A universal concern of parents at these meetings has been that the world will forget their baby. If the baby was stillborn or lived for only an hour, they realize there may be no one other than the parents who really knew the baby. They are concerned that not only will others forget about the baby but even they themselves may forget as the intense preoccupation with the loss eases. Yet parents who lost their baby several months ago reassure the more recently bereaved parents that they will never forget. This concern in part explains the angry

reactions of nearly every parent when well-meaning relatives and friends say, "It's time for you to stop grieving. It was just a little baby and you can always have another." Or "It is just as well she died because she probably would have been damaged." Or "The thing you should do is to have another baby right away." The parents, especially the mothers, have known their babies intimately for seven to nine months of intra-uterine life. After the baby dies, they want to keep the memory of this unique infant alive. They are exquisitely sensitive to any words or actions that seem to depreciate the importance of the baby because their own self-esteem has been shattered as well as their faith in God, their doctor, science, and medicine.

At every meeting parents complain that their friends and relatives avoid discussing the baby and the death. One group discussed how close friends and relatives who were supportive in the beginning later were anxious to find some evidence that the bereaved couple were feeling a bit better or were coming out of their mourning period. Bereaved parents continue to have periods of ups and downs and need help as the weeks pass just as they did in the first few days after their infant's death. But now even their closest friends eagerly restrict conversations to happier subjects. These parents feel there is no one who will listen to the stories they desperately want to tell: the baby's appearance and behavior, the detailed account of the events leading up to the death, and their own subsequent physical symptoms and mental aberrations.

The personal tragedies of Susan Borg and Judith Lasker have led them to write this book to provide valuable insights and understanding for the thousands of parents who lose a baby each year and for those who attempt to help them professionally or as friends and relatives. Many articles have been written about the mourning reactions of parents, and the subject has been discussed in a large number of professional meetings. In our community we have seen major changes in the management of parents after a stillbirth, the abortion of a defective fetus, or a neonatal death, but there appears to have been little impact on the general public as reflected in the reports of bereaved parents attending group meetings or the parents whom we have counseled individually.

I want to congratulate and thank Susan and Judith personally for collecting this information and writing this book so that the bereaved parents and friends of the bereaved, professionals and nonprofessionals, can appreciate the overpowering reactions of parents who have lost a baby. I expect that the information they have supplied will guide many readers so that they can work through the mourning process or enable them to help a close friend or relative get through this time. On several occasions the parents in the group have agreed that it is almost

impossible for any of us to say the right words to parents who have lost an infant. The important point is to attempt to understand what the bereaved parents and family are going through and then to show our continuing concern and availability.

This book should give a large number of individuals an opportunity to understand the long and painful journey many parents have had to travel alone. With understanding, the healing properties of improved communication should benefit many more of the bereaved and those who wish to assist them. Pain cannot and should not be removed from the long arduous trail of mourning, but it can be endured better when understanding spouses, relatives, friends, and professionals travel along with parents.

JOHN H. KENNEL, M.D.  
Professor of Pediatrics  
Case Western University School of Medicine