



## Baby Loss and Counselling

Following a workshop run by Sands Wellington-Hutt Valley in 2012, we worked with Hilary Smith, a Wellington counsellor, to write this document. We hope it is helpful for bereaved parents, families and whānau as you decide on the best path to take for your grief.

### What is counselling?

Counselling is a process. People use it to help them change. Counselling can't change things outside of you, like your circumstances. However, it can help you to find a perspective or approach that might work better for you. So if you're stuck, or feeling distressed, or can't think straight, or act in ways that don't help you; then counselling is one way to help address that.

When you're dealing with the death of your baby or child, counselling might help you to:

- tell your story, let it out without having to worry about your listener
- make sense of what's happening for you, your reactions to that, and what it means for you,
- develop strategies to survive the events and experiences that you can't change
- tell your story again, and again, as its meaning changes for you
- find ways to express your ongoing relationship with your baby
- understand how this experience changes you
- make this experience part of you so you can *live with it* and don't have to leave your baby behind to have a satisfying future.

It takes a lot of living to achieve all these things. Counselling might help you to do all or any of them. It's likely that those changes will happen over time, often over a long time.

You aren't likely to cover it all in one series of counselling sessions. So you may find it useful to think of counselling as a resource you might draw on from time to time. When you feel like it's the right time to take another step and you want some help to do it, then consider counselling.

### What should bereaved parents expect from their counsellor?

You can expect that your counsellor knows what they are doing and can do it well. Ask:

- Are they trained?
- Do they have qualifications?

- Are they a member of a professional association with a code of ethics and a complaints procedure? ( Most will be NZAC, NZAP, CCANZ, ANZASW)
- Do they have supervision and who is their supervisor?
- What is their background and experience for dealing with the issues that matter to you?

You can expect that your counsellor treats you with respect and compassion, and that you feel comfortable with them. It is absolutely fine to ring around a number of counsellors until you find one that feels right. It is also fine to decide after a session or two that you would rather try someone else.

You can expect that your counsellor can and will take care of themselves. They may be moved by your story, but the counselling is about you, not them. You do not have to look after them in any way. Occasionally a counsellor might share some of their own experience, but only if it is in some way helpful to you to hear it.

You can expect that your counsellor is knowledgeable about grief and loss generally. They may not know as much about grieving a baby or child. So it's good to check that out when you are choosing a counsellor.

You can expect that your counsellor helps you to work out what you want from the counselling, and what will be useful for you. Counsellors are usually good at asking questions that will help you to figure this out if you feel uncertain or overwhelmed.

You can expect that the counsellor will work at your pace and will care about your experience and what it means for you.

You can expect that your counsellor will be straight with you about the way they work and their skill and knowledge in the area you need. They will help you to find someone else if you decide you want to change counsellors.

### **What happens if the counselling isn't going as expected?**

If the counselling isn't going as you expected, it's quite likely that it's because you and the counsellor have different expectations about what's wanted. The counsellor may have misunderstood what you're after. Maybe your expectations have changed a little, or maybe you're hoping for something that counselling can't achieve. It is also possible that this counsellor just doesn't quite click with you.

If it feels like the counselling isn't working well for you, speak up. Tell your counsellor it's not feeling very helpful. You can discuss your expectations of counselling at any stage. You can ask the counsellor to clarify where they see the work going. You can say *'this doesn't work well for me'*, or *'I don't like it when you do that'*, if there is something specific you can describe.

You are free to stop the process at any time, and you don't have to offer an explanation. But speaking up is more likely to be helpful to you. It helps you to take control of the counselling process, so you can get what you want from it.

## **How important is it for a counsellor to have experienced the same event as the person they are talking to?**

There is a huge relief in talking to someone who has experience similar to yours. You can feel more confident that your feelings will be understood and accepted. You are freed from explaining. You can take comfort from shared experience and from knowing someone else has survived what you are going through. This has enormous value, and it is part of what you might get through Sands.

You do want your counsellor to have empathy and compassion, but not to feel what you feel. You don't want them overwhelmed by the emotion. You want your counsellor to be able to focus on you. They need to be able to *think about you* as well as *feel for you*. Their key skill is in the process, rather than the content. They help you make sense of what you are experiencing. You bring the content. No one else will ever be more knowledgeable than you are about the loss of your child.

There are life experiences that might help you to feel more confident in a counsellor's ability to understand you. People who have experienced a death of a loved one, or people who have children, might feel a better prospect for you. It is perfectly acceptable for you to ask prospective counsellors about this as part of your selection process.

## **How will I know when I am better?**

You won't get a 'cure' from counselling. So getting 'better' depends on what goals you set for the counselling you're doing. Discuss what you want to achieve with your counsellor and together you make a plan about how to get there. That's like the map for your counselling. You might adjust the goals as you work. But you can expect to come back to them during the course of the counselling to discuss how progress is going. When you achieve them you can expect to discuss your next steps. You might finish counselling altogether, you might take a break for a while, or you might set some more goals and keep going.

In the end it is up to you. As you build up your resilience, you will get a feel for when you've done enough. You can always come back for more later if you decide it would be helpful.