



The Grief Recovery Method<sup>®</sup>  
by The Grief Recovery Institute<sup>®</sup>

# Postpartum Grief

A comprehensive guide that explores multiple facets of Postpartum Grief, including Postpartum Depression, the Baby Blues, Single Motherhood, Placing a baby up for Adoption, and more...



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# About The Authors

This eBook is co-authored by Steve Moeller and Ashley Mielke, both of whom are Certified Grief Recovery Specialists & Trainers for the Grief Recovery Institute; both have a profound passion for helping others heal their broken hearts.

Ashley Mielke & Stephen Moeller



Ashley is a Registered Psychologist and Certified Grief Recovery Specialist® in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. She is also the Owner and Director of The Grief & Trauma Healing Centre Inc., where she leads a team of heart-centred, compassionate psychologists who specialize in Grief Recovery®. Ashley has a strong mission to empower others to move beyond suffering and discover their true potential and purpose in life.

Ashley's educational background includes a Master of Science in Marital and Family Therapy from Loma Linda University, California and a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from Concordia University of Edmonton.

Having experienced painful and life-altering losses in her life, including the death of her father, Ashley has a deep compassion and empathy for the mass of emotions that griever often experience following a loss.

Ashley did not pursue a specialization in Grief Recovery® as a result of her academic or clinical training; it was because she was broken-hearted, and like a majority of others, was ill-equipped to deal with it. By courageously taking the actions of The Grief Recovery Method®, Ashley learned how to complete relationships in her life that ended or changed. Through her own healing, she developed an overwhelming desire to help others move beyond the pain, isolation, and loneliness caused by loss.

Stephen Moeller has been a licensed Funeral Director since 1978. Steve established one of the first Grief Recovery Method Support Groups over thirty years ago. Since then, thousands of griever have gone through his programs. Steve was the Director for Community Relations at Floral Haven Crematory, Funeral Home, and Cemetery in Broken Arrow, OK, prior to resigning to form Grief Recovery Resources, Inc. He also has served on the Tulsa County Task Force on Infant Mortality, the Tulsa Human Response Coalition, and was a member of "Ask the Experts" on Aurora Casket's Funeral Plan. Steve is a featured grief and recovery speaker at hospitals, churches, civic clubs and many other organizations, but spends the bulk of his working time focused on Certification Trainings.

# Postpartum Grief

Ashley Mielke & Stephen Moeller

Postpartum and grief are likely two words you never expected to see together. It's possible that some of you might find it surprising to see Postpartum Grief as a title for an article. After all, the birth of a child is expected to be a wonderful event that brings joy and excitement to a family. We often think of it as something that has been anticipated for months and has involved a great deal of planning in terms of what must be done to create a safe and comfortable home environment for this new child.

*Please do not stop reading!*

All the many changes that occur with the birth of a child are exactly why there may be elements of grief that surface. Grief is the normal and natural reaction to any change we experience in life. Few things in life bring on larger changes than having a child. Suddenly, every decision that's made involves considering how it will impact your child. You can't even make a simple trip to the store without gathering all the things that are necessary to take a newborn anywhere. Where before you might have gone out for a "night on the town" at a moment's notice, now this must be well planned in advance to ensure that child care has been arranged. Everything in your daily life is impacted, which can lead to that emotion called grief.

Some may feel uncomfortable admitting this, but any parent knows it's true! This isn't to say that this type of grief is the same grief that you might feel with the death of a friend or family member. Grief comes in lots of packages. As with any change in life, the impact will vary greatly from person to person. For some it is just "a bump in the road," while for others it can be overwhelming.

The next series of five articles will deal with many of the reasons why people may experience postpartum grief. The subjects we will cover are:

1. **"Baby Blues"**
2. **Postpartum Depression**
3. **Dealing with the birth alone**
4. **Situations where that new baby must be placed for adoption**
5. **Situations where the new parents do not have the emotional support of their parents**

You will notice that we are not going to cover the grief that is experienced by parents whose newborns have died, either prior to birth or shortly thereafter. We have covered this subject in [previous articles](#). The purpose of this series is to address those elements of grief that are sometimes experienced but rarely discussed. Our intention is to address the very real emotions that parents might feel, but may be too embarrassed to talk about with others.

Our goal at the Grief Recovery Institute is to provide education and a safe environment where people can take action to deal with the emotion changes that negatively impact their ability to experience life to the fullest.

In reality, most of us never learned anything of value, during our formative years, on how to deal with any of the emotional pain of grief we experience during our lifetime. More often than not, from our earliest loss events, we learn things such as:

- **Don't Feel Bad**
- **Replace The Loss**
- **Grieve Alone**
- **Grief Takes Time**
- **Be Strong**
- **Keep Busy**

We refer to these suggestions as "myths" since they do little to address the pain in your heart. More than anything, they encourage the griever to bury their feelings inside rather than expressing them to others. These "myths" are born from trying to offer intellectual solutions to emotional reactions after a loss.

While “replace the loss” is not necessarily applicable to postpartum situations, each of the others are often voiced to new parents in one way or another. They are discouraged from feeling anything but joy over the birth of their child. Parents quickly learn that if they are feeling overwhelmed, it's an emotion that is best not expressed to others. They are told that they “just need time” to adjust to their new position as parents. Likewise, they are told to be strong and keep busy to adapt to this new responsibility.

It's not uncommon that one of the parents is burdened with feelings of sadness while the other is not. This can create conflict in a relationship that is already dealing with the changes that a new baby brings to any parents. The purpose of this series of articles is to address those feelings and offer new parents tools to better deal with whatever less than joyful feelings they, or their partner, might be experiencing.

### **Looking at Postpartum from a different standpoint**

We should also say that the term “postpartum” is normally defined as relating only to the mother following childbirth. For the sake of these articles, we will also address feelings that fathers may experience as well. The father is a sometimes-forgotten figure in conversations about the changes that new parents experience.

Even if having children is something that you've never experienced yourself, we strongly encourage you to read the entire series. It may offer you the tools you need to help family or friends that are so impacted.

# Postpartum Grief And The Baby Blues

The months leading up to the birth of a child are often filled with plans, hopes, dreams, and expectations. Many new parents fantasize about who this little person will be, even before they meet. They may even begin to imagine the wonderful experiences they will share with their child throughout their lifetime. This is often a happy and exciting time for new parents. Few, if any of us, anticipate that we will experience a roller-coaster of difficult emotions following the birth of our child. Some feelings may include sadness, fear, anxiety, and even regret. Most new parents have heard of the “Baby Blues”, but they don’t imagine it would happen to them.

## **What are the Baby Blues?**

The [Mayo Clinic](#) lists among its symptoms:

- Mood Swings
- Anxiety
- Sadness
- Irritability
- Feeling Overwhelmed
- Frequent Crying
- Reduced Concentration
- Appetite Problems and,
- Trouble Sleeping

The [American Pregnancy Association](#) (APA) states that as many as 80% of new



mothers experience these symptoms within four or five days of the birth of their child. The duration of these symptoms is unique to each person, but generally lasts a few days, up to two weeks in some cases. For most, these issues occur sporadically throughout the day. The exact cause of the Baby Blues is unknown, but it's thought to be triggered by the significant hormonal changes that happen within the mother after giving birth.

My son Leyton was born on December 15, 2016, six days after my 30th birthday. Nothing could have prepared me for what I experienced the first few weeks after his birth. As a Registered Psychologist and Certified Grief Recovery Specialist, I was well aware of the Baby Blues and the conflicting feelings that may arise after having a baby, but I certainly didn't think it would happen to me. I consider myself to be very self-aware, attuned to my emotions, adaptable to change, and I have an incredible husband and supportive family. I felt generally prepared for my son to be born. One might say I had my "ducks in a row" for this next transition. I thought having a baby would be a "break" from my fast-paced lifestyle as a wife, business owner, university instructor, and certification trainer. Boy was I wrong. It was the farthest thing from a break!

Twenty-four hours after my son was born, we were discharged from the hospital and sent home. Upon arriving home that first evening, I began to feel an overwhelming fear and vulnerability that I wouldn't know how to take care of my son or know what he needed when he cried; and he cried a lot. There was no manual or set of guidelines to follow and that terrified me. All of the intellectual knowledge I had read about was completely useless. I was given the responsibility of taking care of a helpless and dependent little human, with absolutely no experience.

The sense of loss of control, loss of independence, and loss of freedom I felt, was like nothing I had experienced before. No longer did my husband and I dictate when we ate, slept, showered, cleaned, relaxed, or made plans. All I wanted to do was wash my hair, drink hot coffee, and take a nap! I had fleeting thoughts that we had made a mistake and that I had ruined my life. I loved my life before Leyton was born, and I worried that I would never feel happiness or joy again. These thoughts really terrified me and I am grateful I had the emotional safety in my marriage to talk honestly with my husband.

The first six days were the hardest for me. I cried often, and sometimes for no reason at all. I felt exhausted, sad, numb, anxious, vulnerable, and afraid that my husband was going to abandon our family. This was a massive transition

for the both of us and I feared it would be too much for him to handle. On the contrary, my husband felt a deep love and compassion for me and an incredible responsibility to our new family. The last thing he would do is up and leave us! I knew my thoughts were irrational but I couldn't help the way I was feeling.

After the first six days, things began to significantly improve. As the days and weeks passed, I felt more and more like myself, I adapted well to my new role as a mother, and I experienced a profound love, joy, adoration, and appreciation for my son I have never felt before in my life. My husband and I have developed a deeper love for each other, and we couldn't imagine our lives without our son. Leyton is almost four months old now, and it feels like an eternity since I gave birth. The transition has been both challenging and rewarding, and it is the loving and non-judgmental support I have received from my husband, family, and friends that has carried me through it all.

The Baby Blues do not discriminate based on age, race, culture, socioeconomic status, education, occupation, or marital status. Although I felt fully prepared for my transition into motherhood, there was nothing I could have done differently to avoid the normal and natural thoughts and feelings I had following my son's birth. My hope is that in sharing my story, other new mothers will feel validated in their experience and not alone on their journey. I am grateful for my experience today because it allows me to truly empathize and relate to other new mothers who may go through a similar experience.

You may be surprised to read this, that these very symptoms that many new parents experience after having a baby, are the same symptoms experienced by grieving people following emotional loss of any kind. You may never thought of having a baby as a grieving experience.

While the vast majority of information related to the Baby Blues focuses on the mother, the father can experience many of these same symptoms as well. Since these men have not undergone the same hormonal changes, or the physical stress of giving birth, the feelings they may be experiencing are often overlooked. Fathers are often told that they need to "be strong" for the new mother and the baby, and therefore are more likely to suppress and bury these feelings, just as most people tend to suppress any negative feelings related to grief. Any feelings they experience, other than love and joy, are often minimized by others.

Your family, friends, and even people in the medical community may give a

variety of logical reasons why you might be experiencing negative feelings after the birth of a child. The problem is that emotions are not logical. No matter how often people tell you that “you should be happy, because...” it really does not make you feel better. Those statements just tend to encourage you to bury your feelings, rather than share them.

Since this symptomology parallels that of grief, there are actions that you can take to help move you successfully through this process. You can take action to say goodbye to your old life, prior to the birth of your child, which will free you to fully embrace this new life, new relationship and new responsibility. This will free you of any regrets you might secretly hold about giving up old freedoms, rather than stuffing those feelings deep inside where they may persist.

[The Grief Recovery Method](#), as detailed in [“The Grief Recovery Handbook,”](#) is all about dealing with changes in your life. Even positive changes can bring moments of sadness, since they are changes from familiar behavior patterns. This is a step-by-step process to move forward and be better able to experience the joys of both the past and the future. By putting these principals to work for you, you can help yourself move forward and even strengthen your relationship.

The advantage of taking this action, to deal with any sadness or anxiety that you might be experiencing after the birth, is that it will also give you the tools to move beyond any other past losses you might have experienced during your life.

Remember, grief isn't just about deaths that may have touched you on an emotional level. It's related to any relationship that was not what you had hoped it might have been. How often have you heard people say that they didn't wish to repeat any mistakes their parents had made? Now think about how often you have seen them repeat those mistakes? Taking Grief Recovery action can actually help you to avoid falling into this trap! It will give you the necessary tools to make changes in how you approach new situations so that you can be that even better parent that you truly want to become.

Postpartum Grief and the Baby Blues are a very real thing, and fortunately there are positive emotional actions you can take to move through both this experience and any other grief issues that have impacted your life.

# Postpartum Grief And Postpartum Depression

While many new mothers are afflicted by some degree of the “Baby Blues”, a smaller percentage will experience more severe and long-lasting symptoms following the birth of their child. This condition is called Postpartum Depression (PPD).

## The Signs and Symptoms of PPD

According to [The Baby Center](#), Postpartum Depression is characterized by five or more of the following symptoms for at least a two-week period:

- Extreme sadness, emptiness, or hopelessness
- Crying all the time
- Loss of interest or lack of enjoyment in usual activities and hobbies
- Trouble falling asleep at night, or trouble staying awake during the day
- Loss of appetite or eating too much, or unintentional weight loss or weight gain
- Overwhelming feelings of worthlessness or overpowering guilt
- Restlessness or sluggishness
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Feeling that life isn't worth living

Other possible signs may include:

- Being irritable or angry
- Avoiding friends and family
- Worrying excessively about your baby
- Having thoughts of harming your baby
- Being uninterested in your baby, or unable to care for him/her
- Feeling so exhausted that you're unable to get out of bed for hours

These symptoms generally appear within one or two weeks following the birth of the child; however, they may appear during pregnancy or even several

months after the child is born.

Although the exact cause of PDD is unknown, there are several factors that are considered to play a role in the development in this condition, including a stressful or difficult pregnancy, a difficult delivery, health issues impacting the new baby, baby colic, a lack of social support, and a previous history of depression.

PPD isn't an indication of poor parenting or a sign of weakness. Having a baby is a significant life transition that brings forth several challenges for new mothers, who have not had the experience of taking care of a newborn baby before.

### **PPD in Men**

Men can also suffer from PPD. Unfortunately, less attention is often given to fathers following the birth of their child, even though the transition of having a new baby may be just as overwhelming for them. As such, many fathers suffer silently with PPD, without a formal diagnosis or treatment.

[PostpartumDepression.org](https://www.postpartumdepression.org) identifies the following symptoms as an indication that a father may be suffering from PPD:

- Social withdrawal
- Focusing more on work or other distractions
- Consistently low energy and fatigue
- Feeling unmotivated
- Changes in sleep, weight, and appetite
- Alcohol and substance abuse
- Headaches and stomachaches
- Feeling easily stressed or frustrated
- Violent or aggressive behavior
- Impulsive and risky behavior
- Anger and irritability

Several factors have been found to contribute to the development of PPD in men including, lack of sleep, financial stress, marital issues, difficulties with parents or in-laws, feeling excluded from the relationship between the mother and baby, and a history of depression.

PPD is far less common than the “Baby Blues” in both women and men, but the consequences can be much more severe. Without a proper diagnosis and treatment, the symptoms may lead to more extensive medical, emotional, and psychological problems. According to [The Mayo Clinic](#), “prompt treatment can help you manage your symptoms – and enjoy your baby.”

### **The Impact of Having a Baby**

Being a psychologist, I was aware that having a baby would be a significant life transition. I knew intellectually that it would bring forth many new challenges for myself, my husband, and my marriage. However, no amount of knowledge or planning truly prepared us for the emotional, physical, psychological, and relational changes that occurred within the first few months after giving birth to our son. Often, it's not until after the child is born when parents truly appreciate how overwhelming this transition can be.

Unfortunately, popular media fails to provide an accurate perspective of what it means to have a new baby. There is a tremendous amount of focus on the joy, happiness, and fulfillment that a baby brings, which is undoubtedly true, but very little attention is focused on the stress and challenges that may be involved.

The reality is, that every major change we experience in life has the potential to be accompanied by grief. The addition of a new child is an enormous transition that affects all areas of one's life and certainly constitutes as a grieving experience.

### **Addressing the Impact**

We encourage new parents to take action to manage their symptoms following the birth of their child. For some, this may mean seeking the professional support of a licensed therapist and medical doctor.

Ideally, the time to take action is well in advance; even prior to the birth of your child. Taking proactive steps can help to minimize symptoms of PPD, strengthen relationships, and enhance your experience of parenting your new baby.

One way to be proactive is to take the action steps of the [Grief Recovery Method](#) Program. Many of the contributing factors that lead to the development of PPD are already present prior to the transition into parenthood. The probability of developing PPD can be greatly reduced, or even eliminated, if these factors are addressed prior to the birth of your child.

If you've become aware of the symptoms of PPD within yourself or your significant other, we encourage you take action now. Seek the support of a professional to obtain or rule-out a diagnosis of PPD and take the actions laid out in "[The Grief Recovery Handbook](#)". Many of the symptoms of PPD are similar to those experienced by anyone dealing with grief.

Additionally, if you would like to seek the support of a Grief Recovery Specialist in your area, you will find a listing of specialists at the end of this article. Many of them are licensed therapists who can support you in addressing and managing your symptoms. The longer you wait to seek support, the more overwhelming your symptoms may become.

Postpartum grief and postpartum depression are very real issues that need to be taken seriously. Our hope, in writing this article, is that you have a greater understanding of what PPD is and feel better equipped to address early signs within yourself. We encourage you seek support if you're unsure whether or not you're suffering from PPD. With correct information and the right support, your transition into parenthood can be a truly wonderful experience.

# Postpartum Grief and Single Motherhood

Transitioning into parenthood for new mothers can be very overwhelming in the best of situations. Most new mothers have the support of their significant other during this transition, lessening the amount of responsibilities and stressors they may carry. What about a single mother who doesn't have the support of the other parent? How does she manage this transition into parenthood?

## Statistics

The incidence of single mothers giving birth has dramatically increased since 1940. Approximately 40% of babies born in The United States are to unmarried mothers; 42% of those mothers are single and facing childbirth alone. A majority of these new mothers are in their 20s, living in poverty, and have not obtained any formal education beyond a High School diploma.

Although statistics provide us with information about national and demographic trends, they tell a colorless story. They don't provide any context regarding a new mother's circumstances; every situation is unique and individual.

## Circumstances

A majority of single mothers don't intend on facing their transition into parenthood on their own. In most cases, a divorce, break-up, brief relationship, or death of the father are responsible for this outcome. In many cases, these women are not only grieving the end of the relationship with the baby's father, they are also left to manage the many stressors of pregnancy, delivery, and bringing their new baby home alone. (Sadly, depending on the circumstances of the pregnancy, they may have also lost the emotional support of their parents, which only adds to their level of stress.)

Women who are grieving due to a death, divorce, or break-up from the baby's



father may experience a number of conflicting feelings including, pain, isolation, loneliness, and fear. These feelings are likely to be amplified when they bring their new baby home.

A small percentage of women become single mothers by choice. Many of these women are over the age of 35, and due to varying circumstances, have decided to become a parent on their own. Even having made the decision to enter into single motherhood, they are not immune to the emotional impact of parenting a new baby. Without the emotional, physical, and financial support of a significant other, this transition could be very overwhelming for them too.

In our two previous articles we discussed “[The Baby Blues](#)” and “[Postpartum Depression](#).” Given all of the factors we have discussed, single mothers are even more prone to facing these conditions. It is imperative that they remain aware of the symptoms, regardless if they made the choice or not, so that they are prepared to take action if it is needed.

### **Single Motherhood and Grief**

As discussed in previous articles in this series, every major change in life can bring forth the emotion of grief. We are certainly not saying that motherhood is a grieving experience, but rather, the transition from pre-birth to after-birth can create the feelings of grief. Where life may have once revolved around work, friends, and going out, it now revolves around feedings, nap times, and changing diapers. Every element of a woman’s life changes with the birth of her child. Without the support of the baby’s father to lighten the load of the new responsibilities, the mother’s loss of self, loss of independence, and loss of freedom may be significantly heightened. Her grief may deeply impact her ability to be a functional and emotionally stable parent.

### **Taking New Action**

[Parents.com](#) offers a number of helpful suggestions to help single mothers deal with the grief and stressors of motherhood. Here are a few:

- Manage finances accordingly
- Create a support system
- Maintain a daily routine
- Be consistent with discipline
- Abolish “guilt” from their vocabulary

- Take time for their children
- Take time for themselves

Another valuable tool to help process and address the mass of emotions experienced through this transition is the [Grief Recovery Method](#). This method provides the tools on how to effectively grieve and complete relationships that have ended or changed due to death, divorce, break-up, or any other circumstance. This approach would be especially helpful in addressing any unresolved emotional business with the baby's father. Saying goodbye to the hopes, dreams, and expectations of that relationship would not only benefit the mother but also the child. It would allow her to be emotionally present for her child and fulfill her capacity for happiness in her new role as a parent.

In taking the actions of the Grief Recovery Method, new mothers would also be equipped with the tools to teach her child correct information about grief and to help her child learn how to effectively grieve and complete relationships in his or her life that end or change.

### **How You Can Help**

Most single mothers have their hands full, adjusting to motherhood and accessing available resources and supports on their own. If you are a friend or relative of a mother in this situation, we encourage you to reach out to her to offer any support available. Some small but significant ways in which you could help out include bringing her groceries, preparing meals, offering to watch the baby while she showers, takes a nap, or runs an errand, and helping with household chores like laundry and dishes. Even the smallest gesture can make a significant difference in her day.

We also encourage you to become familiar with the signs and symptoms of the Baby Blues and Postpartum Depression so that you can be aware of them, should they become apparent to you. New mothers want and need the emotional support of significant others in their lives, especially during the tough times. Engage in honest conversations with her and tell her you will be checking in with her every week to see how she is managing. Express to her that she is not alone, that her feelings are normal and natural, and that you care about her emotional well-being.

You may also encourage her to take the actions outlined in the “[Grief Recovery Handbook](#)”. One of the foundations of The Grief Recovery Method is to provide assistance without analysis, criticism or judgment. Many single mothers experience all three, sometimes from the people they thought they could trust the most. This may be another way to support and connect with her on a heart-to-heart, emotional level, while she transitions into her new role as a mother.

Over the years I have had the honor of assisting a number of single mothers deal with the emotional losses of their past so that they would not transmit those issues to their children. Each of them has told me that it was one of the best choices that they had ever made for themselves!

# Postpartum Grief When Placing A Baby For Adoption

Although the emotional implications of placing a newborn for adoption can be lifelong, the emphasis of this article is on the postpartum period.

We cannot imagine that making the decision to place a baby for adoption is an easy one. There are several reasons why a woman would choose this option for her baby including, economic circumstances, their age, or the hope of offering their child better opportunities for the future. Whatever the reason, these mothers are likely to deal with a variety of postpartum grief issues.

## Background Information

The number of mothers who have chosen to place their baby for adoption has **decreased in the past several decades**; particularly with single mothers. From the 1950's to the 1970's, nearly 9% of single mothers placed their baby for adoption, and since that time, the number has decreased to about 2%. Not only do single mothers choose adoption, but surrogate mothers as well as committed and married mothers do as well.

In the past, the vast majority of adoptions were "closed adoptions". In these cases, the birth mother had little to no involvement with their new born baby after birth and placement. Today, more mothers are electing to have some form of an "open adoption," which offers them the opportunity to learn more about the adoptive family and/or to have regular updates, and even some form of contact, with their child during his or her life.

## Logic vs. Emotion

No matter the circumstances, the emotional impact of placing a child for adoption can be enormous, and extend well beyond the initial postpartum period. From the logical standpoint, most of these mothers feel that they

made this choice in the best interest of their newborn's future. Family members, friends, partners, and even adoption agencies will often use this logical reasoning to encourage new mothers to make this choice. In truth, it is simply a statement of fact! No matter how true this may be, no amount of logic can fully address the emotional pain of giving up your child to be raised by someone else.

### **This is A Different Kind of Grieving Experience**

Grief is the normal and natural reaction to any major change in life. Giving birth to a child is a life changing event! In previous articles in this series, we have discussed how childbirth can lead to "the baby blues" and, in some cases, even "postpartum depression." In each of these situations, these mothers are dealing with the many impactful changes these new infants bring to their daily life. These changes, in and of themselves, can include elements of grief.

The new mother who has placed her child for adoption is dealing with a wide variety of grieving experiences which are often overlooked and ignored. Despite having gone through the physical and emotional experience of a successful pregnancy and childbirth, they are moving forward without this new child being physically a part of their daily routine.

In researching this article, we have come across the accounts of a number of women who have shared their personal stories of grief. The common thread in many of these stories is that despite knowing that their decision was the correct choice for their child, they are still dealing with their own broken heart.

### **The Postpartum Period for These Mothers**

Few, if any, women imagine being in the situation where they will give birth and then place their child in the arms of another family, perhaps to never see them again.

A web search will find multiple references regarding the children and adoptive parents, when it comes to the issues they will face. Sadly, there is a remarkable lack of information that is readily available to these birthmothers concerning the emotional challenges that they may experience.

There can be an intense sense of loss and emotional pain in surrendering parental rights of a child. It's in this early period that friends and family are often encouraging them to "move on" with their lives. This is similar to telling someone dealing with any major grief experience not to feel bad. There are no words that anyone can say that will heal the emotional pain of the loss; it only encourages them to hide those feelings from others. This is one of the most common bits of bad advice given to any grieving person.

It is normal and natural to want to express one's emotional truth to others and have it both recognized and heard. When those expressions of pain are analyzed, judged, or discounted, grievors tend to build walls around their feelings and sometimes even emotionally disconnect. Those feelings do not go away, just because they are suppressed.

[Adopt Ontario](#) notes that birthmothers who give up the legal custody of their children may tend to isolate from their friends and family, which can lead to depression. They note that this sense of grief and loss is often not recognized by physicians, social workers, or therapists.

[The American Adoption Congress](#) also indicated that many of these mothers are also dealing with intense feelings of shame as well. Shame, in this case, is another word for grief. These feelings may be related not only to placing their child for adoption, but also even becoming pregnant in the first place.

Another piece of advice that is given to birth mothers is that if they wait for time to pass they will feel better. The concept that "grief just takes time" is a major myth. Time does nothing to heal the pain of emotional loss. If anything, time only intensifies the feelings of loss they experience, since they spend much of that time wondering what is happening with their child and all the missed opportunities to watch them grow up.

### **Help is Available**

As is the case in any grieving situation, taking action for recovery is the best solution. Having someone listen to what these mothers are experiencing and offering them direction is the key to moving forward and preventing these feelings of loss from becoming a permanent part of their lives. They need to have assistance in dealing with and "completing" their relationship with their child.

**The Grief Recovery Method** offers proven direction in helping people deal with emotional loss. It gives these mothers not just the chance to express their feelings without analysis, criticism, or judgment, but also the tools to make it possible to move forward. **"The Grief Recovery Handbook"** is a guided journey to dealing with all of those things they might have wished had been different, better, or more in their relationship with their child.

Birthmothers who choose the route of adoption are even more susceptible to the many grief issues associated with pregnancy and birth. They desperately need people to stand beside them and help them through their postpartum period, reassuring them that whatever they are feeling is completely normal and natural and should be expressed openly and honestly with trusted others in their lives.

# Postpartum Grief in Those Who Do Not Have the Emotional Support of a Parent

Ashley Mielke & Stephen Moeller

The lack of parental support for new parents may be a choice made by the parents themselves or by the grandparents for varying reasons. It may be that the new parents choose not to inform their parents of the pregnancy or the new grandparents choose not to get involved. In other situations, the lack of support is the result of a death of one or both parents of either the mother or father of the baby. These new parents are experiencing the many emotions involved in having a new baby and they are also reminded of the death(s) and the missed opportunity to share their experience with their parent(s).

## **Ashley shares her story**

Both my husband and I experienced the grief of not having our fathers there to experience my pregnancy and birth of our son. Although we are both emotionally complete with our fathers and we have processed our grief surrounding their deaths, we still felt the sadness and loss of the hopes and dreams of them becoming grandpas to our child. We shared our grief openly as a couple and talked about what it would have been like to have them here to experience this incredible transition. We know how amazing they would have been with our son and how involved they would have been in his life. Just because the physical relationship ended with our fathers, emotionally the relationships will always continue. There were many tears shared between us, tears of sadness and tears of happiness. It has become an important practice in our marriage to continually take the actions of the Grief Recovery Method to remain complete for our fathers. A large part of this involves sharing our thoughts and feelings openly and honestly with each other whenever we are reminded of them or a missed opportunity to share an experience with them.



Expressing our feelings and telling the truth about ourselves has allowed us to process our feelings in the moment and say goodbye to that hope or dream instead of bottling our feelings up inside. This practice has allowed us to stay fully present with our son, in our new roles as parents, and in our marriage.

The birth of a child brings forth tremendous changes and responsibilities into a person's life. For most, we turn to our parents for emotional support, advice, and help during this massive transition. Being able to talk to someone close to you who's been through this experience can be positive and reassuring.

### **Another mother's story -**

Another story we'd like to share with you is about a new mother who had lost her mother before she had her child. It illustrates the new aspects of grief that can surface, even after becoming emotionally complete in the relationship.

### **Her Story**

*Dear Grief Recovery Institute*

*I've recently become a parent (9 months ago).*

*I have done your Grief Recovery Handbook in 2014 regarding the loss of my Mother in 2003. It was a very healing process for which I'm still so very thankful for!*

*My (first) question is: is it normal that I am reliving some very painful emotions in regards to my Mothers absence now that I am Mother myself? I think I'm experiencing what you describe in your book as 'New discoveries' about unfinished emotional business. Would you advise me to do this in dealing with these emotions?*

*My second question is regarding parenthood in general and the fact that I am experiencing a lot of similarities in the type of feelings in regards to the feelings of grief. Like your chapter on "common responses" on page 13 for example. I'm experiencing all of those things all over again.*

*There are so many conflicting feelings and intense emotions involved in parenthood. All very normal in being a parent. It brings a lot of insecurity, pressure, demands and changes with it. All of this has caused me to strongly feel the need to use the grief recovery method in dealing with this big change in my life, with my new identity as a mother. Somehow it is a loss of the type*

*of relationship I had with my life before becoming a mother.*

*So my remaining questions are: have you heard it before that parenthood can be experienced (partially) as a 'loss experience' by people? Would you advise me to apply the method of grief in order for me to process these emotions and feel more complete and acceptant of my role as a mother? If so, how would you advise me to apply the method for this purpose? I'm not sure if going through every step is relevant. I think it would benefit me to the most if I would write down what I experience as a loss/change and then reading them out loud to a partner.*

*Your time and effort to read and respond to this email is very much appreciated by me! Kind Regards,*

## **Our Response**

*Dear \_\_\_\_\_,*

*It is understandable that you are feeling a whole new set of emotions regarding your mother with the birth of your child. Most women look to their mothers for advice and support during their pregnancies. I am sure that you thought of a thousand questions or things you wanted to talk with her about before the birth of your child and just as many or more since. That is entirely normal! As your life continues, you will undoubtedly think of more things regarding this relationship.*

*That does not mean that you have to start back at the beginning to do this additional "completion work" on your relationship with your mother. Chapter 13 talks about what to do when this happens – it is very much like adding an additional note, or PS, at the bottom of a letter. You need to sit down and graph out the new experiences and emotional thoughts you have had about your mother since you did your initial completion letter. Then make a list of additional apologies, forgives and significant emotional statements related to that graph and any other feelings you can think of that may not be related to a specific line on that graph. These could be things that you better understand about what your mother may have said to you that you now see in a different light, as a mother yourself. Then you start with something like, "Mother, I have been reviewing our relationship some more and have thought of additional things that I need to say..." and then write your apologies, forgives and significant emotional statements like you did in the original letter. Last, but not least, you will need to find someone you trust to listen as you read this*

*additional communication out loud.*

*For goodness sake, do not reread your original letter to your mother as a part of this process, if you still have it. The communication in that letter is complete, and it should never be read again. Reading it over again simply reminds you of things that were unfinished for you before you wrote that letter, and stirs them all up again. After you have shared this additional communication, tear it up and throw it away as well, because it has helped you complete the additional unfinished business you have discovered and is there for unnecessary to save. Then, from now on, when you think of something else you wished might have been different, better or more in that relationship, deal with it in the moment, rather than letting more things accumulate. (This is also covered in Chapter 13.)*

*You are certainly not alone in discovering more things you need to say. Many grievors are so relieved with what they have accomplished in completing a relationship that they forget that life goes on and new things will continue to happen that need to be addressed. Your question on what to do is one of the most common ones we receive! As I said before, you are very normal!*

*Regarding that sense of "grief" that you are experiencing as a new mother, that is normal as well. Now, whether you realize it or not, every action you take revolves around not just you, but also on how it will impact your baby. That is an entirely new experience for you! Remember, grief is the normal and natural reaction to every change we experience in life. Having a baby and someone else that is totally dependent on you is certainly a major change in your life! Every first time parent tends to find the experience more overwhelming than they imagined. That does not mean that your baby is a source of grief, but rather that the change in your role as a person is bringing elements of grief into your life. This is additionally impacted by the fact that you cannot sit down and discuss these feelings with your mother as you undoubtedly wish was possible.*

*You may find that many of these grief related feelings are addressed when you write that additional grief recovery communication to your mother. If you still find that there are additional such feelings that persist after writing that letter, you might consider writing a completion letter about your relationship to your old self as a non-parent, versus who you are now as a mother. Most women would never consider taking this action, because they have not had the experience of using the Grief Recovery Method to deal with another relationship in the past. They simply ride that roller coaster of emotions that*

*come with motherhood and are at a loss in dealing with the conflicting feelings they discover. The fact that you have realized that you could benefit from taking recovery action shows that you know that, rather than living with these feelings, you have to option work through them in a positive way. You should be very proud of yourself for seeing that!*

*I am so glad that you thought to contact us with these questions. I truly believe that your ability to look for assistance in dealing with these feelings of loss shows that you are going to be an amazing mother!*

*Take care – Steve Moeller*

### **Her Reply –**

*Dear Steve,*

*I did it! I managed to do the additional completion work. It's been a hard three weeks, but I'm feeling proud and fulfilled in having completed what was unfinished in my relationship with my mother. A space for moving forward has been created again in my life. I was so relieved to read that my question about doing additional work was so normal! I'm very happy I decided to contact you about it and that I managed to do the completion work.*

*I feel that the additional feelings regarding my new role as a mother were also addressed in my letter. I'm more able to accept and allow feelings of hardship (like extreme fatigue and feelings of isolation) regarding my role as a fulltime mother to arise and live through them instead of fighting them and stressing over them. I'm proud that I made a step in the right direction with this additional completion work and will continue to deal with the emotions regarding motherhood and the absence of my own mother in the moment when they arise so that I don't get stuck on the past.*

*The Grief Recovery Handbook has taught me so much. It has served (and will continue to serve) as a huge support in my life and I'm very grateful for its existence. I truly hope more people realize that there is way to deal with the losses in their lives using this method.*

*Thank you very much Steve for you guidance and support!*

*Kind Regards,*

**Taking Action for a More Positive Future**

No matter the circumstances that have caused you to be missing the support of a parent during pregnancy, childbirth and/or the postpartum period, you can use the same approach to dealing with your emotional pain. In those situations where that new grandparent is still living, but not emotionally available to provide support, it can be valuable to take Grief Recovery action to deal with the issues in that relationship. By doing so, you can avoid allowing those elements of grief from impacting your relationship with your new child.

Many of us look back at our own upbringing and think of things that we want to avoid repeating with our own children. Sometimes these are little things. For those who grew up in an abusive environment, they are often major things that these new parents wish to do differently. Taking Grief Recovery Action is a valuable and positive action that can be done to help fulfill this wish to be a better parent.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Throughout this series we have talked about the value of [The Grief Recovery Method](#) in helping new mothers and fathers in dealing with the many changes that come with childbirth. In this article, Ashley shared her own personal story and Steve shared the story of a woman he had the privilege of supporting through a parallel situation. Both stories illustrated the power of the Method in helping both mothers remain complete in their relationship with their parent and with their new baby.

We sincerely hope that if you are dealing with any issues related to postpartum grief, or any other grief in your life, that you will look into The Grief Recovery Method as a way to both survive and thrive. We offer [programs](#), [books](#), and [training](#) to not only deal with loss related to past relationships and situations, but also concerning the loss of pets and in helping parents assist their children with grieving experiences. Our goal isn't to just assist you at the time of loss, but to give you the necessary tools to better approach ongoing relationships as well.

From Our Hearts to Yours,

Steve Moeller and Ashley Mielke

# More information about The Grief Recovery Method®

We offer local support groups, 1-on-1 support, 2 Day Personal Workshops, and Certification Training to become a leader on Grief Recovery in your own community. We also offer several books available to help you, or others, recover from grief and loss.

The Grief Recovery Institute®

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