

Finding love & joy after loss

Parents who experience stillbirth don't want to simply put it behind them, writes Zoe Taylor

EVERY baby is special, but when Louise Leah looked into the eyes of little Chloe for the first time, the emotions were simply overwhelming. Chloe is the child that Louise and husband Michael could have been forgiven for thinking they would never have the joy of holding.

Louise's first two pregnancies ended in the tragedy of stillbirth. Baby Ella was 21 weeks when she was delivered and brother James was a healthy-looking 6lb 8oz (3.085kg) boy, but he, too, was stillborn at 38 weeks.

It is a heartbreaking situation that becomes a reality for at least six couples in Australia every day, with more than 2000 babies stillborn every year. Often a baby dies towards the end of a healthy pregnancy. And in 30 to 40 per cent of stillbirths over 28 weeks gestation, there is no medical explanation why the baby suddenly dies.

Louise, 30, was motivated to share her story to help break down the taboos around pregnancy loss at a time when momentum is growing for more research to unlock the mystery of stillbirth — with rates 10 times those of cot deaths.

Twenty-one weeks into her first pregnancy, she went for a routine obstetric check-up. "I hopped up on to the table without a care in the world for our usual ultrasound," Louise says. "But I knew straightaway that something was wrong."

A second ultrasound confirmed her worst fears. There was no foetal heartbeat. "Our precious baby was gone," she says.

She and Michael then learned that she would need to labour and deliver their baby. Ella Louise was born more than 24 hours after Louise was induced.

"We had no idea what to expect and had been prepared for the worst so we were amazed to see that she was so beautiful and, although so tiny, was fully developed," Louise says of seeing Ella. "Her features were so fine and delicate. She looked so peaceful."

"Ella stayed in our room until we were ready to say goodbye later that night. It was such a surreal thing: how do you say goodbye to your baby, knowing you'll never see her again in this lifetime?"

A range of tests failed to discover why Ella had died.

"I went through such a range of emotions each day," Louise says. "I had moments where I would cry my heart out and be angry, asking, 'Why me?' I just wanted my baby back. Then moments later I was at peace with her passing and had happy memories of our beautiful girl."

The Central Coast couple were warned by their doctor that people would react differently to Ella's birth and death and that some would not know what to say, and therefore would say nothing.

"The hardest thing for me was that I had a beautiful daughter and I couldn't show her off to the world," Louise says. "I couldn't sign her name on cards. I was limited to who I could show photos to. I wanted people to understand that I was a mum. Just because we couldn't see her didn't make me any less of a mum."

Five months after losing Ella, Louise was pregnant again.

"I was very positive the entire pregnancy," she says. "Not once did I think it could happen again. I had heard of women who had had two stillbirths, but I didn't think it would happen to me. We were told the baby was very healthy and everything looked good."

The couple were a little nervous about setting up the nursery they had dreamed

looked so peaceful. He was only 6lb 8oz, but his face was round and chubby. The hardest thing was that he still looked alive, like he was only sleeping. We kept waiting for him to wake up and start crying. Again we were left with empty arms and broken hearts."

Once again Louise and Michael were planning their baby's funeral and close to 90 friends and family helped the couple say goodbye to their second child.

There was an explanation this time, however, as it appeared the umbilical cord had become wrapped around James's foot, cutting off his oxygen supply.

Amazingly, Louise did not give up on her dream of being blessed with a child she could watch grow up.

"I have to believe there can be positive things that come from tragedy: our growing love for each other, newfound friends, feeling the amazing love and support of so many family and friends that I didn't know we meant so much to and a greater appreciation for the miracle of life and the meaning of patience," she says.

Like most women who experience stillbirth and miscarriage, Louise's patience was rewarded — with baby Chloe born in September last year.

Despite striving to remain positive and relaxed throughout the pregnancy, Louise admits that she could not really believe she was going to meet her baby until she felt her kick on the morning of a planned caesarean at 38 weeks.

And while Chloe is a delight to her parents, she is not a replacement for her brother and sister.

"Being Chloe's mum is everything I dreamed it would be," Louise says. "But I still get emotional at times when I think of everything we've been through and just let myself cry."

"I have reached that light at the end of the tunnel — a place I had started to wonder existed. I find myself in awe of this beautiful baby girl. Her smile lights up my world and fills me with pride and joy."

But while it was worth the long struggle, the pain will always be there.

"It will always be there, but not always

Louise Leah with her daughter Chloe. Louise had two stillborn babies — Ella and James — before she had Chloe

sad. It was worth the long struggle," Louise says. "Chloe is proof that you can find love and joy again after loss. Life does go on. The pain heals and we don't ever move on, but we move forward and bring them [Ella and James] with us. "I am a mother-of-three. I am no longer scared to tell people about Ella and James for fear of making them sad. They are a part of me. Chloe will know about her siblings from as early as she can understand, as Michael and I talk about them every day."

A sacred place

Louise Leah's fairy garden for baby Ella, designed to be a place of reflection in memory of her first-born



A cherished moment

The bond between Louise and little Chloe is "proof that you can find love after loss"



Hope for the future

Chloe will be raised in the knowledge that she was the first of her parents' three children



It was like deja vu. This could not be happening again. It couldn't! But it was and it did. We had lost our baby.

of, but by 36 weeks it was all ready and Louise's hospital bag was packed. "We passed all the danger periods and our baby was fully developed. Our baby was coming at any time now," she recalls. But concerned about a lack of movement from her usually very active baby, Louise went into hospital for a check at 38 weeks. Following an ultrasound, she was faced with the incredible reality that once again there was no heartbeat.

"It was like deja vu. This could not be happening again. It couldn't! But it was and it did. We had lost our baby. The reality sank in immediately. We knew what lay ahead," she says.

"Our beautiful baby boy, James, was born sleeping. I will never forget my husband's reaction as he realised he had a son. It broke my heart. "James was absolutely perfect. He

Learning how to explain our immense pain



HOW do you find ways to describe what it's like when a baby dies during pregnancy? Sometimes even the most carefully chosen words are not enough. Try devastation, incomprehension, gut-wrenching sadness. There might be feelings of guilt, failure, anger and frustration. There can be disbelief, denial and sheer horror.

And regardless of how far the pregnancy progressed before it ended, the grief tends to be hidden.

These are some of the reasons why the struggle to make sense of miscarriage and stillbirth is often very isolating. Too often couples feel unable to talk about their grief for fear of upsetting others and of exposing themselves to insensitive comments and lack of understanding.

But the reality is that pregnancy loss is much more common than many people imagine.

One in four women experience pregnancy loss of some kind. A large proportion of pregnancies — about six out of 10 — are lost before conception has even been confirmed. A further 10 to 15 per cent will fail later during the

Pregnancy loss is poorly understood

pregnancy. While the chances of a pregnancy failing fall to only about 2 per cent after the first trimester, the number of babies being stillborn (after 20 weeks' gestation) is surprisingly high: about seven in every 1000 babies.

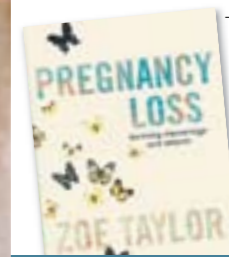
That means that every day in Australia, about six babies will be stillborn.

What tends to compound the grief of parents struggling to come to terms with the death of an unborn baby is that while pregnancy loss is not unusual, it is poorly understood. Medical professionals are often unable to offer an explanation.

It was as I stumbled my way through my own grief over four miscarriages that I discovered the need and found the inspiration to write a book about pregnancy loss.

After hearing the stories of close to 100 couples, it was clear that while every experience of pregnancy loss is unique, there are common themes and invisible ties that bond those touched by this tragedy. Many contributors to the book told their incredibly moving and emotional stories with a pride born out of the rare opportunity to acknowledge and remember their babies.

My hope is that by sharing our frustrations, tragedies and triumphs through this book, we can offer comfort and provide some idea of how it feels to walk in our shoes.



Pregnancy Loss: Surviving Miscarriage And Stillbirth, HarperCollins Australia, \$27.99, available from February 2010. A portion of sales will go to the Stillbirth Foundation Australia

www.pregnancylossbook.com
www.stillbirthfoundation.org.au