

## Stillbirth Happens – let's talk

### **E05: It changes you forever**

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**ERIN:** Hi, I'm Erin.

**JAIME:** Hi, I'm Jaime. We're both moms who have experienced stillbirth.

**ERIN:** We know how important it is to have a safe space to grieve and to process what's happened to you. We want this podcast to be that space—a place for you to go when you need to be around people who understand something about what you're going through.

Losing a baby can transform who you are. You may see the world differently. For bereaved parents life may feel like it has a before and an after.

**JAIME:** You may feel you are no longer on the same path as you once were or envisioned. Your reality has changed and your future looks different.

**ERIN:** You lose your innocence, really. You go from never imagining this could be something that can happen to me, to it quickly becoming your reality.

**JAIME:** In this episode, we're speaking with a parent whose baby was stillborn 17 years ago, and we'll learn about how this experience shaped the way they navigate the world and how it is transformed who they are and how they see themselves.

**ERIN:** We will also hear from a registered clinical counselor to learn about how grief impacts you over time.

**JAIME:** But first, meet Helen. She has two living daughters, Samantha and Zoe, who are adults, and AnaRose, her daughter, who was stillborn 17 years ago. Welcome, Helen. Thank you for joining us.

**HELEN:** Thank you for having me.

**JAIME:** Can you take us back to that time, 17 years ago? What can you share with us about AnaRose's birth story?

**HELEN:** It was a scary time, I think, like, I already had, um, Samantha and Zoe who were, you know, not toddlers anymore, and I'd just been for a routine checkup with my doctor at her clinic and she couldn't find a heartbeat. So she had sent me over to the hospital, but she was very, not worried like, or maybe she was, but wasn't letting me know she was worried.

And so I went over to the hospital for an ultrasound where they couldn't find a heartbeat, and they told me that she had died. And so, you know, I could have delivered any day, I was at full term. And I had had a friend who had a stillborn baby at six months, and she had to carry that child for some time after she found out. And so I knew that I did not wanna leave the hospital until I had delivered Ana. I couldn't go home knowing that, um, she wasn't with us anymore.

Um, so I called my husband, who, uh, he's a bus driver, he parked his bus on the side of the road and came over to the hospital and then, you know, we just, uh, called my parents and, uh, we just went into having her delivered and it was, I don't know, I just really wanted to get the job done kind of thing. Like, I just needed it to be over, I think. Um, so we delivered her and, uh, she was my biggest child. She was, um, 10 pounds actually.

**ERIN:** Wow.

**HELEN:** Um, so she was, um, very ready to be born. Um, and then, uh, I had some very serious complications after. I had, um, a placental abruption, which is why, um, she had died. But I have, um, weird placentas I think, I have placental abruptions, but I also have parts of the placenta that doesn't let go. And so, um, with the abruption and the delivery, I had hemorrhaging. So I remember vividly being run down the corridor of the hospital to the OR, um, where I had a D&C, but then because of the placenta, that doesn't detach, I hemorrhaged again two weeks later. So I had another D&C, so, and of course low iron levels and still having to look after other children.

So I remember it clearly, but it's not a pleasant, um, except that I had Ana, right?

[music]

**ERIN:** Right.

**HELEN:** I clearly remember her; I can still picture her face and what she looked like.

**ERIN:** And did you have the ability to take photos of her? Did you know any options that you had? Did they have any of that?

**HELEN:** No, not really. Um.

**ERIN:** No?

**HELEN:** I had her, and then we're dealing with the loss and then the, the hospital staff come in and say that a social worker will come in to see me, and then I'm like, why do I need a social worker? 'Cuz social workers have a stigma about, okay, did I do something wrong? Like, why do I need to see a social worker? But it's, she turned out to be the most wonderful person and she took charge in the hospital, right? She asked if I wanted photos and if I wanted to hold her. And you know, she she knew the things to ask that I didn't know because I had never experienced this before.

Um, so, um, yeah, she took pictures and she made a plaster cast of Ana's feet, um, and so I had that and then, this social worker had actually been able to connect me with a family in need so I was able to pass on all of the things that I had for Ana to a family who could make use of them. So, I was very happy to, that Ana could give in that way.

**ERIN:** Oh, that's beautiful.

**JAIME:** It is. What impact did this entire experience have on you at that time?

**HELEN:** At that time, um, I think, you know, once you're able to go beyond the four walls of your bedroom and you're outside, I, I remember like immediately after that, just everyone seemed to be pregnant or everyone had a child and you know, you just wanted to warn them about what could happen, you know, because you, it's all, it's celebrated as this joyous thing, which yes, it should be, right? But there's so much I think that's not known about maternal health. And you know, when you think about it, its two parts making a new whole, but none of those two parts are the same in any, in any way, in any scenario. So it's always kind of a crapshoot as to what you're gonna get.

And I think that I, I just felt that it was just like, I just needed to warn everyone, like, do you know what you're in for? You know what the chances are that you're actually going to have a healthy live child, right? So, you know, and I hated feeling like that, but it was like, you have no more like hope, right?

Because I've, when you lose a child, you're not only losing that child, but you're losing everything that you had hoped for. Everything that you wished for your child, right? Like, they've not had the life that you had dreamed that you were gonna have with them.

**ERIN:** When you talk about losing the hope of the future of Ana, did that change how you approached parenting Samantha and Zoe, afterwards? Or do you think that you kept on the same path? Did stillbirth affect your decisions?

**HELEN:** I don't think so. Not consciously. I can't say that, you know, oh, I made this decision because of what happened. But, um, you know, I still made sure that Samantha and Zoe had the opportunities and were able to do things that, that they wished for themselves, that I wished for them.

And I don't think I really changed in my parenting of them because I think I'd already been a parent who encouraged them, you know? And I don't think I, like, you need to do this because Ana didn't have that opportunity. I, I don't think that, but I do think often, even now, like what would *my* life be like if she had lived. You know, I'd have a teenager now who would be graduating high school this year, and what would that, where would I be in my life? Um, because I would still have a child at home. Because my other children are 27 and 31. Right. So they're in school or living their own lives. But, I always think about those things like, you know, when she was starting kindergarten and, and you know, this summer, what would we be doing if we still had her and just planned a trip with my older daughter and it would be like, you know, she would be coming. Like...

**ERIN:** Right.

**HELEN:** ...those kinds of things.

**JAIME:** Yeah, I can totally relate to that. And I, and I here and there, and it's not every day, and it's not all the time, but there are times where I think, um, yeah, you know, life would be different. I would have two boys that very much needed their mother around all of the time. Uh, versus my daughter who is graduating from high school, and so she's forging her own path right now. And I can absolutely relate with feelings like that and thoughts like that as far as what, what would my life be like if stillbirth hadn't um...

**HELEN:** mm-hmm

**JAIME:** ...been an experience that, that we had?

**ERIN:** I always struggled with saying no to Gracie afterwards I was like, give her whatever she wants. And then I was creating a...

**HELEN:** yeah, yeah

**ERIN:** ...a lovely toddler. And I was like, okay. I remember my mom sitting me down and was like, you are gonna have to start saying no again. And I remember I struggled with, she's not here and who knows how long Gracie or Quinn are gonna be here. So, but that is definitely tamed down. And I think I'm the mom who I always

thought that I would be, you know, I'm more open with a lot of things as well. I don't hide anything from my kids either, but my kids will still once in a while bring up, you know, well if Ryann was here, like they used to always fight about who would share a room with Ryann.

**HELEN:** Mmm, yeah, yeah.

**ERIN:** Growing up. And then my son a few years ago was like, I'd be the only one who would have my own room because I'm not sharing a room with a girl. And I just thought, you know, it's kind of neat how they still bring her into their lives, even though she's not here, she's still thought of.

**HELEN:** Yeah, I find out now that my children are adults that they do that because like she was born in August and so I don't have as hard a time now, but around that week, I would just be like, inexplicably emotionally off kilter, but it's the week of her birthday.

My daughters actually now celebrate her birthday with me, so they have actually, it's the sweetest thing. The first thing they did was sent me, 'cuz neither of them are in town at the moment, so they sent a rose, um, a red rose 'cuz her name is AnaRose and it's one of those preserved roses. So, and they always send a card and message and it just means a lot that they also remember her, right.

**JAIME:** They too lost. They, they lost their sister and they remember her.

**HELEN:** Mm-hmm.

**JAIME:** With you, um, definitely, for sure.

**JAIME:** How did the stillbirth experience affect your relationships with friends and family?

**HELEN:** Um, well, my immediate family, my parents, my husband and the children, like all very supportive and, uh, I was a very active, um, Girl Guide member at that time. So my Girl Guiding family also, um, came to the rescue, would deliver mystery packages outside the door.

Um, but there was one particular family member, my aunt, who was sad to lose from our family, and, and she was older, it was more like a, you know, an older aunt or a grandmother for Samantha and then Zoe when I had Zoe. But when I lost Ana, she just didn't grasp the depth of the loss. And after some time had passed, she just expected that I should just get over it.

Um, and she said, you know, are you over your little hiccup now? Like, you know, can we go back to life the way it was, and I just couldn't. I couldn't have

someone who just didn't even like, want to understand or didn't have the capacity to understand. So, um, she's not in our life anymore.

**ERIN:** Wow. Yes. Lots people have good intentions, but sometimes get it wrong.

**HELEN:** I had many, many other, you know, supportive people who were there, but it still hurts to lose people.

**ERIN:** Just having people or friends, like what you were when you were talking about the Girl Guides coming and just leaving something on your doorstep. I don't know how many times I would open the door and there'd be something, cookies or treats for Gracie or something and I'd be like, oi-y-vay, thank gosh 'cuz you know, you just, it's helpful. Right?

When I came back to BC after burying Ryann, cause I buried her in Manitoba, a bunch of my friends were like, "let us know when you're ready for a visit, let us know when you need anything". So I bluntly just told everyone like, if you wanna do something, just show up 'cuz I'm not gonna reach out, it was out of my capacity. And one person showed up unexpectedly that day and I just remember like how good it felt just to feel supported. They didn't know what to do, they didn't know what to say, so they did nothing, they just showed up. And it's unbelievable, you know, how much help that can be. But, when you also deal with people who were brought up in a different generation, it's so tough 'cuz they were a 'sweep it under the rug' generation. Right? That's the way they were raised. And it's just heartbreaking to have to feel like you need to explain everything and they just can't be and hold space for you, right?

So while you're going through your grief, you're also grieving the loss of a family member, you know, who couldn't be there for you, which is so unfair.

**HELEN:** Yeah it's interesting, right, because people don't know what to do or how to help you, and you don't really know what to ask for, what you need. My niece called me one day because her good friend had had a stillborn baby and she didn't know how to help her friend. And so I was telling her like, you just need to be there, you know, or drop something off at the door if she's not able to, to function. Really like to know what it is that she needs, but, you know, just do what you can.

It's always like that, right? People like, tell me what you need. I can't tell you what I need. What I need is my baby back. Right?

**ERIN:** Yes!

**HELEN:** Um, so yeah, and you know, there were so many people that had other friends who just, um, my lifelong friend that I met in grade five, actually her and her husband just took over like the funeral and, you know, just would ask me questions about, "would you like this or that", or, you know, simple things. Um, that they planned the whole thing. And then we had a little, um, reception at their house, like

just where the family could come and many of our friends and family came with us to where she's buried.

The funeral home really was great in that too, right? Where they just, yeah, we'll just put her in there and, you know, it's, they make it as easy as, possible I think when it's a, well a baby, but I mean, that was just my experience. But, they gave us these little, um, bells to hang like on your Christmas tree. So we have a little, we have little Ana bells that we hang on the tree. And then I have a very dear friend that I've known since I was 17, and every year she makes an ornament for the Christmas tree for Ana. It's Ana's ornament, and...

**JAIME:** it's beautiful!

**HELEN...**you know, it's just, people take the time to remember.

[music]

**ERIN:** Yeah.

**JAIME:** Yeah. Thanks Helen.

**JAIME:** This episode is all about the lasting ways in which stillbirth changes you. Because grief isn't a phase, it's a way of life. We reached out to a grief counselor to get their thoughts on just some of the ways that grief impacts the rhythms of our daily life. Let's have a listen to what they said.

**ANYA:** My name is Anya Mostrenko, and I'm a registered clinical counselor. I support parents who've lost a child due to stillbirth through individual counseling, couples counseling, and group therapy. Back in the fall of 2020, I teamed up with the Butterfly Run Vancouver to offer a perinatal loss support group.

The grief of losing a child due to stillbirth can show up in a variety of ways in a parent's life. Initially, parents may feel a sense of shock, sadness, hopelessness, lack of energy or motivation to do things that they previously enjoyed doing. More anxiety or fear regarding their personal safety, the safety of their loved ones, future family planning, and future pregnancies.

With these challenges, bereaved parents may feel easily irritated or angry. They may also experience resentment regarding their loss or injustices experienced during the loss of their child. Parents may find their grief compounded by the silence and stigma associated with perinatal loss.

Stillbirth and other forms of perinatal loss are sometimes referred to as an ambiguous loss. This is a form of loss that is not recognized or supported by society. These forms of losses do not typically have traditions or rituals attached to them as we do with other significant losses in our lives. As a result, the people around us don't know what to do or say, so they often say

nothing at all, or they ask people to reach out when needed. Often people who lose a child due to stillbirth are unable to reach out and advocate for what they need.

The good news is parents can break their silence and stigma using strategies which have been demonstrated to support the bereavement process. Parents can benefit from connecting with people who have shared experience and are open to listening and providing support without judgment or a need to make things better.

Parents can use mourning rituals and continued bonds, lean into their grief, and support the bereavement process. Mourning rituals are ways of honouring your child shortly after their death, taking pictures, making molds of their footprints or handprints. Some parents may choose a cremation or a burial. I like to remind people to make the choices that feel best for them.

Continued bonds are a little bit different in that they're ways of maintaining a connection with your child. Lifelong things like naming your child, speaking their name out loud, celebrating anniversaries with family and friends. Other people may plant a tree or release butterflies.

And finally another one that I like to talk to people about is what I call self activism. So that's advocating for yourself for other people, and even doing some volunteering in the community that may be supporting people in groups related to stillbirth online or it could be something like volunteering for the Butterfly Run Committee or becoming a race day volunteer. It could also be delivering a bereavement box to your local hospital.

There's a famous quote by Vicky Harrison that goes like this "grief is like the ocean. It comes on waves, ebbing and flowing. Sometimes the water is calm and sometimes it is overwhelming. All we can do is learn to swim."

Grief doesn't really go away, but it does change in how it shows up over time. In the initial stages of the loss of a child due to stillbirth grief may be defined as true sorrow. These overwhelming emotions that come with grief tend to decrease over time. When grief does not lessen with time, parents may experience what is known as complicated grief. Complicated grief is a heightened state of mourning that keeps parents from healing. This may be linked to the lack of support or an inability to really do anything to work through the loss of a child.

Individuals who find safe ways to share their story and honour their children are more likely to process the trauma related to their loss. Through this process, parents were able to still hold the emotion of the event without being overcome by it. Bereaved parents who use continued bonds lifelong are more likely to feel joy and happiness related to their child. They're also more likely to feel connected to their child lifelong.



[music]

**ERIN:** So Helen, back to you. How has your grief transformed over the years?

**HELEN:** Um, uh, well, initially of course it was devastating and yes, you can't get out of bed and you can't carry on with your life. I mean, I had to, to a certain extent cause I had two children who needed me, who still need to go to school and still needed a lunch.

And, but like I said, I had people helping through that. I don't, I can't tell you that, you know, in March of whatever year, all of a sudden it became easier. Um, just, it's just morphed over time, right? When you have those little memories and you, you can smile about them now or you know, if she was here, we'd be going on the trip, you know, together, or she'd be graduating high school.

I can just think about them with fondness. I think in my life now I'm just surrounded by people who are kind and supportive and, you know, you can talk to them about anything. Um, yeah, so, you know, I think 17 years on, there's a lot of, uh, things that would've happened in my life and her life if she had lived. I, I guess it gets easier is the word, but, um, it's not easy, but you just, it just changes right, the way you think about her.

**JAIME:** And you mentioned change and, and so that's what I wanted to ask. How have *you* changed as a result of your experience, um, with Ana's stillbirth?

**HELEN:** One thing though, actually, yeah, I think of it is because my daughters are of an age where their friends are getting married and having children and then going to the baby showers. It's, I've always had this thing, but it's always, it's more in the back of my mind now where - are you sure you wanna have the shower before the baby is here? You know? But I'm able to go and I was just at one, um, in September actually, and I was just, I was able to go and celebrate more, you know? Um, which I think is a, a growth thing because it would be like, you want, kind of wanna avoid those situations, right? So, I guess I've changed in that way where I'm able to go out there more and celebrate their joy, but with Ana's memories. And I'm not crushed by it in that way. Right?

I'm a very strong person now, and I speak out for a lot of other people. Like at work, I'm a, a representative for, um, the people at work. So I think, you know, everything that happens in your life makes you the person that you are today. And it, it's just...

**ERIN:** it's like that quote, "you don't know how strong you are until being strong is the only choice you've got." And what words would you offer someone just at the start of their journey around stillbirth?

**HELEN:** I think it's, it's not often the words that you say, it's the action that you undertake, right? And I think wherever anybody is in their journey, and we certainly don't all go through the journey at the same rate, we all have different things in our lives, you know? Um, I had children, some people might not have children, so I, it's, you know, it affects the path that you're, that you're on. So I think it's just important to not necessarily say any words, but just to be there and take on a role in that relationship where that person knows that you're there for them. That I can share a story with you when you're, when you're ready, and maybe just throughout the hanging out with someone, just physically being present for someone who's going through that journey.

You know, you have the opportunity to, share little things in your daily life. Let's just go for a walk. And in that walk you see something and then you can talk about something to do with Ana. And you know, just talking in little bits in normal conversation where it doesn't have to be a massive thing that you have to talk about, but it's just, we can just talk about it or we can not, we can just, just be.

**ERIN:** you're so full of wisdom 'cuz that is so it! But it's not about the words, it's about the actions and it's so hard in our, in our world, everybody wants to be able to say something or do something to make you feel better, and that's really not what we need. So, that is huge.

**HELEN:** Yeah, and really, are there any words? Like I don't know.

**ERIN:** Yeah.

**JAIME:** Exactly.

**HELEN:** And if you're on this journey, you need to know that you're not alone. That there are so many people who've experienced the same thing, and so find them.

**JAIME:** As Erin said, um, you have many words of wisdom and we are much appreciative of that and, and just, I, I loved what you said because each of our journey is unique and it's about doing what's right for you and what you need, and that is going to be different for all of us.

And, and it's not right and it's not wrong. It's about what's right for yourself and giving yourself that permission and that time and space to do what you need. And I agree, finding other people, finding connections, having conversations like we've had today. I've had the pleasure of knowing Erin for, for 10 years now, and, and being able to connect and, and know one another and just truly understand. There are no words, uh, for that either.

We're so grateful for you, Helen, for sharing your story with us today.

**HELEN:** I really appreciate the opportunity to help me along on my journey, which 17 years later, I'm still on.

**ERIN:** Thank you, Helen.

**JAIME:** and thank *you* for joining us to listen to Helen and Anya. And if you experienced a stillbirth, whether it was a short time or a long time ago, we understand that both your joy and your sadness are a testament to your love. Grief and happiness can and do coexist. Please join us whenever you can and share this podcast with anyone who needs it.