

*My Baby
My Grief
My Love*

A pregnancy loss journal

Second Edition

JULIE ANN BRYANT

Preface

There is something very cathartic about seeing your words, your thoughts, in black-and-white in front of you. This is especially true for when you are seeking to understand and make sense of a traumatic event in your life. I began writing poetry as a teenager. In my 20s, 30s, 40s and beyond, my writing has continued in the form of journaling as I have sought to make sense of some traumatic experiences I had faced as a young woman.

The process of trying to conceive isn't always as straightforward as it seems. It becomes even more complicated when an infertility diagnosis is made. My infertility journey began in the mid-80s, spanning some 15 years and once I was under the care of my reproductive gynaecologist, we had 10 stimulated cycles. The accumulated disappointment of each failed cycle was so crushing that I faced the possibility of remaining childless. We took a year-long break from my fertility treatments and went overseas. It was on the aeroplane, homeward-bound to Sydney, that I said to my husband "Let's give it one more try".

It goes without saying that the most traumatic, the most profound loss I have ever experienced was that of my babies. We conceived five babies through our first IVF (in 2000). On day five, following our IVF procedure, three of our blastocysts succumbed and we had a twin-embryo transfer. Sadly, at the

mid-pregnancy ultrasound we learned that our precious twin 2, who we named Meggie, had died and I went on to carry both babies to full-term.

With our second IVF (in 2003) we had a total of 18 blastocysts that cycle, with 5 of them succumbing and on day five we had another twin-embryo transfer. Our remaining 11 embryos were put on ice. A few years later, when we knew our family was complete, our frozen embryos were donated to IVF research with the knowledge that they would ultimately help other couples also trying to conceive.

I am ever so grateful for the expertise of the reproductive gynaecologist who helped our dream of parenthood become a reality. Infertility is not a journey I would have chosen for myself, however, the experiences and knowledge I have acquired along the way have helped shape me into the person I am today.

Our two living children are now adults and we are so thankful to have them in our arms. We are beyond proud of who they have grown up to be.

The loss of a blastocyst – the fertilised egg in its pre-embryonic state – is quite devastating when a couple is going through IVF. So much emotion and hope is invested in the process of trying to conceive. They may just be eggs, however, for a couple dearly wanting to start their family – to welcome a child into their lives – those eggs are their hope for the future. You only have to look in the mirror to see the potential held in each of those little babies lost along the way.

Each loss is a different kind of loss. When you are processing the grief each time, it is still quite profound. Each loss, regardless of the gestational age it occurred, deserves to be grieved.

Experiencing a profound loss leaves you needing a safe haven, a soft place to fall and simply be with your grief. In so many ways, my journals have been my safe haven, my soft place – where many a time, I have fallen and simply been with my grief. My journals have been my constant companion as I worked through my experiences of grief on a very private level.

As a child on the autism spectrum, I had a rich inner world and quite happily existed within it (it should come as no surprise that I still do!). My love for reading began in my teenage years and my special interest was of memoirs. Much of my time (and money) was spent on my personal collection of books.

Hand-in-hand with reading is writing. Writing helped me understand the world as I see and experience it. Learning to touch-type as a young woman was hugely advantageous for me because, when typing, my fingers have a greater chance of keeping pace with my thoughts as they race through my brain.

So while some of my journals were handwritten (and for the most part, illegible!), much of it is typed and stored in password-protected files on USB sticks. (If this, too, is your preference, then I strongly recommend doing a back-up of your files every now and then).

I started typing one journal in 1999. Over a decade later, in 2010, I revisited that journal and added new experiences and thoughts I had learnt in the interval. Again, in 2020 and 2023, I revisited it again with even more insights and epiphanies. Looking back over that one journal now, spanning some 24 years, I can see how my understanding has evolved over a substantial period of time. It clearly shows how far I have come, even though it hasn't felt like that at times!

This is why I am so passionate about writing down the things that are important, and especially so in the context of grief and trauma. It helps us make sense of the senseless. It helps us process our memories over time. It preserves those memories. It provides us with a safe means for tapping into our thoughts, of expressing them, of giving them a voice.

Your loss may be recent or it may have occurred some time ago. It may have been your only pregnancy or perhaps you have experienced many pregnancy losses. Individually our experiences are unique to us, however, pregnancy loss can be a silent grief suffered by so many other couples, who, like you and me, had hoped to share their future with their precious little baby.

This, dear grieving parent, is my reason for writing this book for you. This book can be a safe place for you, where you can tell your own story of love and loss in your own words – and I, in turn, will also tell you a little of my story as well. I hope this will help you feel less alone in your experience. I hope it will

help you feel understood and validated in this most traumatic event of your life.

Most of all, I hope that as time goes on, you will see that your grief is actually a beautiful expression of your love that keeps you emotionally connected to your sweet baby. He/she may no longer be in your arms, but they are safe in your heart and there you carry them with each brave step you take, every day, for the rest of your life.

Introduction

The inspiration for this book came from my earlier book, *From One Twin Mum To Another: An insight into the complexities of multiple birth bereavement* (2022). It has been written, first and foremost, for parents grieving the death of their baby. This book would also be insightful for anyone wanting to understand more about the grief of pregnancy loss; as well as being a valuable resource for health and mental health professionals who have grieving parents in their care.

Owing to the nature of pregnancy loss, both books contain similar themes and discussions. It is inevitable that there will be an overlap of ideas and concepts as both books are based on my personal experience, together with my observations and insights into the grief of twin loss and pregnancy loss respectively. However, each book is unique in its own way and thus, they complement each other. I have endeavoured to keep the content of this book relevant to you, the reader.

Specifically, the three themes carried through both books are as follows:

Firstly, Chapter Two of my earlier book is called, "Your Grief (Your Love)". If I were to define grief using just one word, then that word would be LOVE. I truly believe that our grief is an expression of our love characterised by sadness and yearning. This personal definition of grief underscores much of what I say.

Secondly, I had included a list of writing prompts to help my readers explore their own experience of twin loss and grief in a meaningful way. Subsequently, those writing prompts have also inspired the concept for this book. I hope it provides you with a valuable opportunity to write about your grief in a safe and private place at this point of time.

Thirdly, I had also included a section on Self-Care and in Chapter Four of this book, I invite you to write your own self-care plan, exploring your own needs as you work through your grief, giving careful consideration for how those needs could be met.

It was over 20 years ago that I carried my twins, knowing that one of my babies had died and there was no guarantee that my surviving twin would be born alive. Whatever the circumstance of your pregnancy loss, I am so, so sorry you have to go through this trauma. The words I write in this book are for you. They are also the words I wish someone had thought to say to me all of those years ago.

I am writing this book with you in the forefront of my thinking. Through it's pages I want to reach out and reassure you, dear grieving parent, that you are not alone. Having my unborn twin die was not on my radar and I did not know of anyone anywhere in the world who'd had a twin pregnancy like mine. I felt all alone. I felt so misunderstood. I felt mentally unprepared for the journey that lay before me as I anticipated the birth of my twins.

Through the pages of this book, I also hope to reach out and reassure you that you will survive this. You will survive. Somehow, some way, you will summons the strength and resilience you need to grieve and come to terms with such a profound and devastating loss. It is not going to feel like this forever. I remember what it is like to be in those early days of grief. It is overwhelming and it is all-consuming. You do your best to get through one day at a time, sometimes even just one hour at a time.

Give yourself the time and space you need to grieve, and to grieve well. Your grief is, after all, a very special expression of your love.

With my love and thoughts for the journey you are on. Your loss is profound but you are not alone, for I am journeying alongside you.

With my warmest regards,

Julie Ann

A Note Regarding The Second Edition of This Book

After much thought I have elected to republish this book as a second edition with a few changes – the most notable of which are as follows:

1: The book width has decreased and thus, the dimensions are now at the more standard size of 216 x 140 mm.

2: The cover image has also changed to signify this new edition.

3: Intentionally short and concise, 36 of the 37 writing prompts can be viewed in their entirety on the open page.

3.1: The lined journaling pages in the originally published edition have been removed.

3.2: The subsequent rewording of: *"How To Use This Book"* consistent with the abovementioned change.

How To Use This Book

I wanted to keep the format of this book simple and clean.

There are, in total, 37 writing prompts spread over the four chapters of this book. In each one I briefly explore various aspects of grief in the context of pregnancy loss. Each prompt concludes with a question designed to help you write your own pregnancy loss journal.

As you read through the prompts, it may help to jot down a few important thoughts and memories and then express and explore your thoughts more fully using, for example, a writing pad or password-protected file on your computer. You may want to read through all of the prompts before you start writing (it could be helpful to do that chapter-by-chapter).

It may even be your preference to read the book through and leave the journalling part of it for now. This book will still be helpful in explaining grief as it relates to pregnancy loss and you can always come back to it again at a later time.

How you approach it is entirely up to you.

You may want to keep much of what you write private. There may be some things you'd like to share with your partner, a trusted friend, family member or grief counsellor.

Also remember there is no right or wrong thing to say, just whatever is right for you. Write whatever is in your heart.

It may help for you to use a writing technique called free association. This is where you write your thoughts unedited. Whenever a new thought pops into your mind, write it down. Don't question it, don't overthink it. It might feel a little disjointed and the thoughts may not seem to be relevant, however, just write it down anyway and keep on writing until you have absolutely nothing left to say. Then go back and read what you have written. It may surprise you the thoughts you have tapped into and it may give you new insights.

I hope that sharing a little of my journey will encourage you to tell your story in your own words, in your own way and that in doing so, a little peace will enter your heart.

Take Good Care Of You

By virtue of the fact that I have written this book, you will already know that I am passionate about writing. I am also a great believer in having good mental well-being. Writing is such good therapy when you are working through the process of grief and trauma, and we want to keep it that way!

However, it would be remiss of me to overlook the emotional aspect of remembering. There will be times when writing will be just what you need to do, as a part of telling your story and seeing your words, in your own handwriting, on the page in front of you.

Those words may help you cry. They may help you remember other things or understand your situation a little more deeply or differently. You may find it comforting and validating to see the story of your loss taking shape.

At other times your words may feel confronting and make you feel overwhelmed. If, at any point you do feel overwhelmed, it's okay to put your pen down and have a rest. This could help you keep it all at a manageable level.

There is no timeline for grief, so there is no need to rush your way through this journal. Take your time. You will come back to it again when you are ready, I promise!

Feeling overwhelmed may be a good indication to talk to someone in the meantime. It may be your partner, a trusted

friend or family member; It may be your family doctor or another health or mental health professional, or perhaps even a Helpline telephone counsellor.

The key to taking good care of yourself is to be self-aware because then you will know what you need and you will have a better idea of how to meet those needs. Again, I mention the Self-Care Plan as outlined in Chapter Four, which I hope you will find beneficial.

If you have a history of prior mental illness, then it is good to be aware that it can coexist with your grief. Depression, for example, shares similar characteristics to grief, even though there are clear differences between the two. It is possible that clinical depression, for example, can recur concurrently with your grief, complicating and prolonging your grieving process.

When trying to conceive, or when a pregnancy loss occurs, our mental and emotional well-being is so important. You may already be under the care of a counsellor or psychologist and if they are made aware that you are struggling with your mental well-being, then extra help and support can be made available to you. I want to reassure you that there is no shame in struggling with your mental health, especially at a traumatic time like this.

It can be tempting to self-medicate grief, especially to aid sleeping or to numb the emotional pain. Please understand that this is not wise or helpful in the long-term and self-medicating with alcohol, over-the-counter, prescription or illicit drugs will

only serve to complicate and prolong your grieving process. If this is an area of struggle for you, it would be far more beneficial to elicit extra support by talking to your family doctor or a mental health professional, preferably someone who understands pregnancy loss in the context of grief and trauma.

It can be hard enough navigating the daily pressures of life. Throw a trauma into the mix, such as experiencing pregnancy loss, and it is clear our need to be self-aware and to have strategies for coping is very important, as well as appropriate supports in place. Be self-aware and be diligent with your mental health because you deserve to feel well and to grieve well.

Now is a good opportunity to identify what health and mental health services are available to you in your local area and country. Your family doctor or other health/mental health professional may have already provided you with some contact details for peer and/or professional support. If you are unsure of what services are available to you in your local area, then I would encourage you to ask your family doctor...

Chapter One:

My Baby

Your Sweet Baby Forever

I want to start by acknowledging your baby's humanity. Was your sweet baby a boy or a girl? If your loss was early and you're not sure, it is okay to go with your gut feeling. This is your baby.

You hold this book in your hands because you are grieving a life lost all too soon and that loss is profound. I am so sorry that you have to go through this heart-break. I know your loss is real. I know your grief is real. There is so much for you to process.

What did you name your baby? His/her name will belong to them forever, and I think that makes it very special. If you haven't already chosen a name for your baby, then I would encourage you to do so. I understand that this may be an emotionally difficult task. However, in a circumstance over which you had no control, this is the one thing you can control. Where so many things have already gone wrong, making this one decision will just feel right. Your baby's name will always be on your lips and to hear your son/daughter's name spoken out loud will always sound like the sweetest music to your ears.

Meggie was named in honour of the doctor who set me on the path to motherhood. Margaret is the English variant of the Celtic name Megan, and both names mean "pearl". After the

birth, when I saw Meggie's tiny and frail but perfectly formed body, her skin was very pearl-like, which added to the significance and beauty of her name [i].

As well as naming your baby, a birth certificate is also an important acknowledgement of their existence. Here in Australia, when the loss isn't legally recognised as a stillbirth, parents can apply instead for a "Recognition of Early Pregnancy Loss" Certificate. I think this is a beautiful initiative and certainly, a very precious memento to keep. If you live outside of Australia, it might be worthwhile looking into if your country can provide you with something similar.

Tell Your Story ...

Is there a special significance for the name you have chosen for your baby?

Where It All Began

Let's go back to where it all began – your baby's conception.

Was this baby a planned pregnancy or did the news of your pregnancy come as a total surprise? If it was the latter, did the news of this pregnancy bring with it uncertainty for your future as you had planned it?

Do you fall pregnant easily? Or did you, like me, have a diagnosis of infertility and need the expertise of a reproductive gynaecologist to realise your dream of parenthood?

Was your baby conceived as a singleton? As a twin? As a higher-order multiple?

In the wider context, what else was going on in your life at that time? Were you studying? Were you working? What was that like for you as you mentally prepared yourself for pregnancy?

Life doesn't always happen in a linear fashion (as nice as that would be!) and you may have had other significant things going on at the time you fell pregnant. In that way the timing might not have been ideal and it's okay to have mixed feelings about that.

The news of your pregnancy may have had an impact on your relationship with your partner. Did it bring you closer together or was it a time of adjustment for you both?

My pregnancy was planned in that I was doing IVF, however, I would also describe it as "long awaited". It was 15 years leading up to the moment where I heard these words for the first time: "Congratulations, you are pregnant!" All of the pain and disappointment of so many years of primary infertility and failed treatment cycles just seemed to melt away in that instant.

As we adjust to being pregnant, the thought of a new life brings with it new hopes and dreams for our future and we start to imagine who this child will be and how they will fit into our family.

Tell Your Story

How did you feel when you learnt you were pregnant with this little one?

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My Baby, My Grief, My Love
is also widely available for purchase online.