

Longer-ago baby loss: A qualitative study to explore the experiences of older women

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Aims and rationale

Support following baby loss has increased over the past 40 years. Before this time, baby loss was not acknowledged as a major trauma and families were discouraged from expressing grief. The study aimed to explore older women's experiences of longer-ago stillbirths.

Methods

Eight mothers aged 65 and over participated in the study through a semi-structured interview about their experience(s) of stillbirth. The interviews were analysed qualitatively, identifying themes on an individual and group level.

Findings

Theme 1

'Still screaming after all these years'

Having a stillbirth had a lifelong impact on the mothers with pain that never fully went away, long-term effects on mental health and positive experiences of accessing support (when it was offered), including in later life.

"There is a part of me that's still that young woman screaming... I get yanked there sometimes on a negative day... when things are not going right, my mind goes there, still screaming after all these years, 41 years."

Theme 2

'Just trying to be normal when it was anything but'

Stigma was felt by the mothers through lack of empathy and support from professionals, nobody acknowledging or allowing space for them to talk about their losses and feelings of guilt, shame and self-blame.

"My friends would come in and visit me and they didn't ask about the baby, or they didn't ask what happened, and I didn't tell them because I assumed nobody wanted to know."

Theme 3

'Your whole perspective changes'

Having a stillbirth shaped the lives and views of the mothers thereafter, including doing things they never would have imagined, becoming more empathetic and being able to identify positives or develop traditions.

"It's changed me, definitely, from rather a naïve, silly young woman in some ways to someone who thinks far more deeply and is more empathetic than I was before."

What we have learned and recommendations

Longer-ago baby loss has a lifelong impact on bereaved mothers that is associated with disenfranchised grief: grief that is not publicly accepted or acknowledged. When bereaved mothers are given an opportunity to talk about their experiences, they want to do this and it can help to alleviate some of their pain. The study has been shared with professionals across older adult and baby loss services, and recommendations have been made.