

# 'Grief crashes over you like a tidal wave'

## When Marina Fogle set up an antenatal class to help women she never imagined that she'd have to cope with the stillbirth of her own baby

I remember vividly the first time I was forced to contemplate stillbirth. I had just founded the Bump Class and was speaking at the Baby Show when a woman approached me and asked whether I would distribute her leaflets, giving expectant mothers crucial information, to my groups of expectant mothers. I looked at the leaflets and recoiled in horror. Alongside information on how important it was for mothers to monitor their baby's movements were pictures of women cradling their stillborn babies.

My immediate reaction was one of utter shock. I appreciated the importance of this information, but surely there was a better way of sharing it. I was also passionate about positivity in pregnancy. For some extraordinary reason, as soon as people find out that you are pregnant they immediately tell you the most atrocious birth story they have heard. Ranging from catastrophic tearing in a place that you don't feel can even tear to grizzly forceps encounters or the epidural "going wrong", these often ferociously inaccurate stories scare the living daylights out of already hormonally wretched women.

So my sister, Chiara Hunt, a GP, and I designed the Bump Class to be honest but positive. The professional explanation of



Marina Fogle with her children Ludo and Iona  
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the gory bits ended up reassuring these shellshocked women. Our main message was that, if birth were really that bad, there would simply not be a global population explosion. We reassured the women that whatever they went through it was worth it. I am ashamed to say that those leaflets went in the bin and there was no mention of "the S-word".

And then suddenly this taboo was forced upon me in a way I had never expected. In August last year, 33 weeks into my third pregnancy, I suffered an acute placental abruption. I was rushed to hospital and had a caesarean under general anaesthetic. As I groggily opened my eyes, I was told that

my baby, a little boy, had been stillborn.

When catastrophe hits you, people tend to react in peculiar ways. I didn't cry for a few days, but I do remember thinking: "What am I going to tell the Bump Class? Will this tarnish me and prevent me from doing a job I genuinely love? Will I continue to be able to reassure anxiety-ridden mothers that all will be OK? Or will I become the 'leper' of antenatal classes, my story making people recoil?"

Still in hospital, I wrote an email to the girls who were on the course at the time. I wanted them to hear from me, to know I was OK, but most of all I wanted to reassure them that what had happened to me was extraordinarily rare and that it was very unlikely to happen to them. I realised that rushing back into teaching would be a mistake, so I took a few months off work. However, sooner than expected, I wanted to get back to the job I so loved.

Therein lay the next challenge. At the start of the eight-week course I tell the girls a little about myself. I tell them about the different professionals that they will meet along the way — from the physio to the midwife, the doctor and the breastfeeding specialist. "I have no professional qualifications," I tell them. "I am simply a mother, but I'll get to know you


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all and, alongside the professionals, I will bring irreverent humour and practical advice to the classes.”

And I tell them about my wonderful family — my beloved Ludo, five, and Iona, four, whose chaos has taught me to multitask on a level I’d never expected and whose honesty reminds me on a daily basis what really matters in life. But should I tell them about my other little boy, the one who never had the chance to make me smile?

When grief hits you out of the blue, crashing over you like a tidal wave, you learn a lot very quickly. And I think one of the most important things I learnt is not to be afraid of the truth, however sensitive your audience. I sat down with Ludo and told him, tears cascading down my cheeks, that his little brother, Willem, had died. We looked at photos of him and I told him as much as I could about how it had happened.

Crucially, talking about our nightmare gave Ludo the opportunity to ask me the questions he needed to and gave me the chance to reassure him that I was safe and well again. And I realised then that, rather than brush the terrible events of August under the carpet or stoically pretend they hadn’t happened, I had to be honest with all those important to me — from my children to the Bump Class girls, who had put their trust in me to prepare them for the most important job of their lives.

Of course it is easier said than

done. As soon as I mention the word “stillbirth” my usually calm and confident voice trembles, my palms sweat and my hands shake — just for that moment — and then, as soon as I’m on to the next thing, it is fine again. Apparently it’s classic grief, but it never fails to astonish me that the simple recollection of a trauma can have such a profound physical effect on me. And as I break my news to a group of excited mothers-to-be, gently stroking their bumps, their eyes full of hope and excitement for the future, I don’t see any signs of recoil, of shock, of horror. Rather I see compassion, empathy and most importantly trust.

It’s like the new relationship I have with these girls suddenly changes from first to fourth gear. We suddenly have an understanding; they realise it is OK not to be perfect and that the spectrum of their experiences — the rocky roads they have trodden, the desperation, however significant or insignificant — doesn’t necessarily need to be locked away.

Last week was Baby Loss Awareness Week. My old self would probably have wondered what the point of it was; do you really need to ram the idea of dead babies down people’s throats? Only now do I appreciate its value. It’s an opportunity to remind people that stillbirth does happen; indeed, the UK has one of the highest stillbirth rates in the developed world. Awareness

helps all of us understand what mothers can do to prevent it. But it is also an opportunity to break the extraordinary taboo we still seem to have surrounding stillbirth, the idea that it is something we don’t talk about, that it is too shocking for pregnant women to be burdened with.

One of the hardest things I’ve had to come to terms with was the senselessness of my son’s death. He was a perfectly healthy baby, and no one can tell me why my body failed so spectacularly. But if his death can give me a voice to talk about something that people are afraid of talking about, or give a pregnant woman the confidence to seek advice if she has any questions or concerns about her pregnancy, his death seems a little less pointless, and that makes my pain a little easier to bear.

**Marina Fogle is the patron of Mama Academy, to which she has donated her fee for this article. To find out more about the charity’s Wellbeing Wallets — which expectant mothers use to carry their antenatal notes, providing a means of conveying important safer pregnancy information — go to [mamaacademy.org.uk](http://mamaacademy.org.uk). Funding received from NHS England this year is providing 75,000 pregnant women with a Wellbeing Wallet. They have shown promising results in the maternity units already using them, but more funding is needed.**

[thebumpclass.com](http://thebumpclass.com) ■

