

The Telegraph

Marina Fogle: 'Five years after losing my baby, this is what I've learnt'



'Willem hasn't given me the laughter and joy I'd expected – he's given me arguably more'

- [Marina Fogle](#)

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Before 2014, I'm embarrassed to say I'd never heard of Baby Loss Awareness Week. And then, like an avalanche that ripped through my core, I realised how important it was. Pregnant with my third child, I was rushed to hospital in my third trimester, haemorrhaging. I awoke from a general anaesthetic after a crash caesarean section to learn that I'd had a little boy but that he had been stillborn.

I'd not known anyone who'd experienced stillbirth. My job, teaching antenatal classes, largely involved reassuring anxious mothers to be that they were in good hands, that pregnancy was what our bodies were born to do and not to read the horror stories of when it went wrong. I was now one of those horror stories.

This summer marked what would have been Willem's 5th birthday, a day for me that is always etched with sorrow; a reminder of what could have been and a sadness that we should be playing games and eating cake, rather than being unable to eat for the ball of grief sitting heavily in the pit of my stomach.

But amidst the sadness, I also feel pride, an admiration for the resilience of my family and how far we'd come. We have now spent two anniversaries in Austria, a country I love but where Willem was so cruelly taken from us. As I spent a week recovering in intensive care, I doubted whether those halcyon Austria summers would be possible any more.

One of my most vivid memories of those early days was wondering how on earth I was going to cope, how was I going to come to terms with the death of my son. What I know now is that my thinking was wrong; although I felt very alone at the time, no-one should have to deal with this alone – because while your friends and family can't bring your child back, they can help you deal with it.

The British have a complicated relationship with death. The 'stiff upper lip' is a notion many of my parents' generation still cling to: the idea that by not talking about sadness or death, especially when it happens to children, the grief will disappear, as if by magic, all on its own.

This couldn't be further from the truth. When we aren't permitted to talk about our sadness, it festers malignantly, turning sour the delights that life still have to offer. It wasn't that long ago that women whose babies had died were not allowed to grieve at all. Bereavement counsellor, [Jenni Thomas](#), told me when I interviewed her on [The Parent Hood](#) podcast this week, how when she was nursing in the 1960s, medical staff were not allowed to tell patients the sex of their stillborn children. There was a firm idea that the less you knew, the easier it was to move on.

Our understanding of emotions, of how the brain processes grief, has thankfully moved on. After Willem died, I was lucky enough to see [Julia Samuel](#), a bereavement counsellor who helped both my husband Ben and me navigate the seemingly incomprehensible riddle of grief that we faced. She taught us how to talk about Willem, both to each other, to our children, Ludo and Iona, then four and three, to our friends and to strangers. She gave us the confidence to be bold, to tell people the truth about our loss and not shy away from our tragedy.

Looking back, I see how in those weeks after Willem died, that I was at a crossroads. I could either melt away into my sadness, or march out into the world and not let it take any more from me than it already had. I have written and talked extensively about our loss, both privately and publicly. As a family, Willem's name is often mentioned. He might not be present in person, but he is very much a part of our family. And because of the work I do, [teaching antenatal classes](#) and presenting a parenting podcast, I'm often asked how we can best support someone who is grieving.

The worst thing you can do is say nothing. Before I'd experienced grief myself, I remember thinking that maybe it was better to say nothing, than say something insignificant. After all, it's not like you can ever take the pain of their grief away. This sentiment couldn't be further from the truth. Silence from friends, family, work colleagues, acquaintances, is not interpreted as sensitive.

To me, it said they didn't care. I know this wasn't the case, but that's how it felt to my grieving self. Conversely, even simple texts saying "I'm so sorry", reminded me that I was in someone's thoughts and these felt like little virtual hugs.



Marina and Ben Fogle at home with their dog, Storm: 'Talking is often the best medicine' CREDIT: ANDREW CROWLEY

Talking is often the best medicine. The women I've supported through baby loss have all wanted to talk and I've lost count of the amount of walks and runs I've done where we've been able to download. It's much easier to talk when you're not sitting opposite each other staring intensely into the other's eyes. So walking, driving, cooking... anything where you're busy will facilitate a potentially difficult conversation.

Jenni Thomas told me how parents of dead children love that child as much as any living offspring, and as a result feel they want to talk about them but feel guilty about burdening people. This is especially true of those who've given birth. When a baby dies, the death eclipses the birth and they have no opportunity to talk about an experience that ordinarily would have been the most significant thing to happen in their lives. Elle Wright, whose son Teddy died a few days after his birth, wrote a bestselling book about loss, poignantly entitled, *Ask Me His Name* in which she describes the comfort she got from people initiating a conversation about the thing that was most important to her.

Alongside talking, time slowly starts to heal grief, and while on the one hand this is comforting, bereaved parents often fear that people will start to forget the child who didn't get to live, but whose loss burns so acutely in their hearts. After a while it feels like you have to be silent in this sadness, that you have to move on, because everyone else has. This makes the pain more intense.

I encourage women to keep talking about their babies; when they are asked that common but so loaded question of how many children they have, to be honest in the answer.

This is why the anniversaries and milestones are so important. I'll never forget the bunch of flowers that arrived on Willem's due date, from Ludo's godmother, a woman who in spite of never having children herself, understood my needs better than many who had. As time goes on, people do forget, and this is hard. My sisters forgot Willem's birthday this year and were mortified when I reminded them, sobbing, at the end of the day. "I just don't want you to forget," I blubbed, "because you forget what doesn't matter, and Willem did matter."



Marina and Ben with their son Ludo, daughter Iona and Storm: 'Willem might not be present in person, but he is very much a part of our family' CREDIT: KIRSTY O'CONNOR/PA WIRE

Five years on from receiving the news that no mother should have to contend with, I'm a different person. On Elizabeth Day's *How To Fail* Podcast, Mo Gawdat, the author of the bestselling book *Solve For Happy*, recounted how in his research on grief, following the death of his son, he surveyed over 100 bereaved people asking them the question whether, if given the choice, they would wipe the whole experience of their loss from their memory.

I thought about this carefully, and realised that while I'd love for Willem to be the cheeky, healthy boy I'd anticipated, would I erase my pregnancy, the stillbirth and the pain I've felt in the aftermath? My response is probably one of the most encouraging things to tell people lost in that quagmire of grief. Because while I wouldn't wish that kind of loss on anyone, and I know that while Willem hasn't given me the laughter and joy I'd expected, he's given me arguably more.

Five years on from an experience that nearly killed me, I'm stronger, wiser, more confident and a hell of a lot more feisty. I'm someone who can look fear in the eye and walk on anyway. I'm someone who can have difficult conversations with everyone from my children in their bedroom to Piers Morgan live on TV. I'm someone who has stood up and shown my vulnerability and emerged stronger for it.

And so in answer to Mo's question, would I prefer never to have been pregnant with the boy who never got to live? Was a week in intensive care, being asked how far along I was when my empty uterus bulged through my t-shirt, or waking up on his due date, knowing I'd never celebrate this day, worth the resilience it's built in me? I'm pretty sure you can guess the answer.

To listen to [Marina Fogle](#) in conversation about how to support parents after the loss of a baby, download [The Parent Hood Podcast](#) on iTunes or wherever you get your podcasts from.

The fee for this article is being donated to [Mama Academy](#), the UK's Baby Loss Prevention Charity who work to prevent stillbirth.