

The Share Companion Program



Purpose:

To offer peer support to families at the time of the loss of a baby and during the grieving process.

Peer support is a well-researched and evidence-based model of care, and is utilized in many healthcare settings to promote a patient's emotional health and healing. Peer support helps encourage individuals to become more engaged and empowered in their own recovery. Through the sharing of personal experiences with a peer comes a verification of the many emotions someone is feeling, a validation of the loss of their baby, and a very real example of hope for recovery. Share Companions provide this type of peer support and ultimately foster hope in a positive path of healing after great loss.

The Share Companion Program began in response to the need for increased bereavement support in local birthing hospitals. Many hospitals and other patient care facilities have experienced budget constraints that have inhibited a bereavement program's ability to serve patients at the time of a loss. Bereavement Coordinators are experiencing challenges in meeting their family's needs with the small amount of time they are given for their positions. Providing both the physical and emotional care that these newly bereaved families need can be challenging. Having a volunteer ~a Companion ~ whose sole purpose is to serve the family with peer support is an invaluable enhancement to a bereavement program. Through the Companions experience and training they are seen by families as role models on the reality of recovery and are viewed by the staff as assistants in providing compassionate care at the time of a loss.

Share Peer Companions are parents whose loss has occurred at least eighteen months prior to volunteering in this role. Parents who choose to be Companions have often been a part of a support group and have voiced their desire to help other families navigating the tragedy of their loss. These parents are those that have shown great strength as they integrated the loss of their baby into their lives. Through the ongoing support of Share and other families in their support group, these parents witnessed the healing benefit of peer support. Their stories and experiences all different, but their recovery and strength all are inspiring.

To become a Companion, a parent attends the National Share training program, *Sharing and Caring* or *The Caring Companion*, to obtain extensive education on perinatal bereavement, family grief support, and Aftercare support. Companions also go through volunteer orientation at the facilities in which they choose to serve. The Companion then further trains with the Companion Coordinator or the facility's Share Coordinator for 2-3 hospital visits to gain confidence and comfort serving a family at the time of a loss. Companions have good communication skills and are open to all diverse social, religious, and cultural circumstances.

Companions are called to the hospital bedside to help a family through a time of tragedy, shock and heartbreak during the death of their baby. Companions provide support, hope

and understanding as a family begins their grief journey. Companions work with the family to help advocate their needs and provide direction on the rights they have as parents. Some of the tasks of the Companion may include:

- Assist in memory making items for the family
- Discuss memorial planning and disposition options
- Listen and talk with other grieving family members
- Offer support and guidance to the facility staff in the emotional care that they are giving to the family

With the consent of the family, Companions can provide follow up support. This aftercare support can include:

- Phone support of calls or text, that which is preferred from the family
- Attend support group meetings with families
- Provide information on memorial events and attend the memorial service
- Provide them with helpful sources
- Mailings on anniversary dates and special occasions.

Companions build relationships based on guidance, trust, and a goal of healing.

The time a family can spend in the hospital with their baby can be crucial in their path to healing, as this is their time for their Hello and Goodbye. Having the opportunity, when possible, to hold and dress the baby is often a healing experience for the parents and family. Having tangible objects of the baby such as photographs, hand or footprints, a lock of hair or a crib card with the baby's name are essential. Companions are experienced in helping families take photos and create these mementos in the hospital at the time of a loss and yet are sensitive to the reality that each family is different and may have different needs and desires. Companions understand that these items will help show the parents the actuality of their baby and can contribute deeply to a parent's journey of healing.

Share Companions provide support to the parent's and families. Often guidance is needed on how to talk to the siblings about the baby that died. Grandparents are also in need of support as they are searching for direction on their personal grief and looking for ways to help their family in their heartache. Companions offer support to the entire family and are trained to provide opportunities for the entire family to grieve, while respecting the family's need for privacy.

Not to be overlooked is the fact that hospital caregivers are also grieving. Often nurses or doctors will look to the Companions for support on how to help and what to say. The companion serves as an advocate for the patient and family, working together with the healthcare team. Having Companions present relieves some of the stress that the staff is experiencing. Companions often serve as reassurance that all needs are being met.

Losing a baby is not the expected or the usual cycle of life, and it is often unsupported and overlooked grief. When a baby dies, there is a significant loss of a parent's dreams and future. It is a unique grief in that there has not been the chance for the parents to fulfill their thoughts and dreams; they can be left with few memories to reflect back on. Many people will not understand the depth of a parent's grief nor will the parents fully

understand even as they are experiencing it. Companions, through their personal loss, grieving and training are a source of positive support as the family continues on their journey.

The success of a Companion program is dependent upon the guidance and supervision of the Companion Coordinator. Maintaining a diverse group of Companions with ongoing open communication is vital. The Coordinator is responsible for developing and maintaining a call system that facilities can utilize to access a Companion. The Coordinators primary role is to insure coverage of trained Companions. Recruiting new companions will be ongoing. Establishing a follow up survey for Companions, the staff and families will be an important tool for assessment of the program. Data collection and tracking volunteer time can be a means to help validate a program. Maintaining open communication with Companions and facility staff is imperative

For the Companions to be called upon by a facility and utilized as part of the care giving team, a clear understanding of the purpose and role of the Companions by all staff members is required. A team /unit orientation of the Companion role is recommended. Integrating a new role into a multi-disciplinary workplace requires a full understanding from all team members of the role being served or it may be met with resistance. A job description for the Companion should be included in the onsite Share manual. This will help to manage both the staff and Companions expectations.

Companions demonstrate that integrating your baby's story into your life is possible and that remembering and loving your baby always continues. Companions continue to grieve as they carry on this very important role. Volunteering as a Companion provides a sense of meaning and fulfillment as they share the story of their baby and their path to healing. Companions understand that there is no time limit on grieving and mourning, and that there are many emotions in grief. Having peer support during this process can positively influence a person's mindset, emotional health and wellbeing.

The mission of Share is to serve those whose lives are touched by the tragic death of a baby through pregnancy loss, stillbirth, or in the first few months of life. The vision of Share is to set a standard of perinatal bereavement care through a lifetime of support, hope and healing – one family at a time. A Companion program is an addition to a bereavement program that sets a high standard of support.

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