

Guidance Note On Dealing With Bereavement In Sikh Families: Still Birth And Miscarriages

Why are we issuing this guidance?

Death of a loved one is never an easy event to deal with, this is more so, when that loved one is has passed away through either a miscarriage or a still birth. Issues arise such as the care and support of the Mother. Research suggests that this has been one of the largest triggers for mental health issues within Asian women. There is also a great deal of superstitious practice that does not follow the prescribed practices of the Sikh faith. This note helps to set out more clearly the issues and how best they should be dealt with.

How does Sikhism perceive death when related to a baby?

The death of a child, especially one that you have not known is not easy. Sikhism views death of a child as similar to that as an adult. There is to be no difference in the way in which the child is treated. This therefore involves cremation. There has been a practice in India of burying young children. However, in the west, this would mean that a grave allocated space would need to be purchased and this is not acceptable for Sikhs. Whilst this is practiced in many households in India, it does not have any grounding within the principles of the Sikh faith.

Therefore, the same procedures as set out in our guidance notes on death in a Sikh family should be adhered to. A Sikh family may wish to choose the name of the baby. This is best done in consultation with the family and the local priest as to which Hukamnama will be used to determine the letter from which to choose the name. There is no set practice or prescribed route concerning this.

How should the Parents be comforted?

Following the loss of any child, our thoughts and efforts must go to providing solace to the parents of that child.

The parents should be offered an opportunity to say prayers for the child. The focus should also be on ensuring that the Mother is fully supported and comforted. Unfortunately, a practice that has occurred due to cultural conditioning is that people will comfort the Mother in an inappropriate manner. Blame is sometimes attributed, and women who have suffered miscarriages are told they cannot cook or enter certain places of worship for a prescribed number of days. All of these practices go against the principles of Sikhism. The Mother is to be comforted that is God's will, that

she is not to blame nor will she be judged. Appropriate counselling should also be sought for the couple as soon as it is feasible to do so.

A perspective on premature births in Sikhism, what would you say?

Taking as our premise that birth and death are in the hands of God, as our Guru teaches us, and understanding that we do work out our karma here on Earth, it is logical that some souls only need to be in human form briefly. This is a painful, heart-breaking experience for parents. Similarly, a sick child brings another set of circumstances where sorrow and grief can take over, but, by the grace of God, if people can maintain their faith, and accept everything as God's will, as painful as it may be - the karma gets worked out. Accepting the will of God even in the worst circumstances is a great spiritual achievement. Our Guru tells us that God is the Doer of everything. That includes many unpleasant, difficult, and even terrible things.

Faith is easy, when things are easy, but the real test is when they are not. It is not the life that matters, it is the courage that we bring to it. Remember those women we speak about every day in the Ardas? "...Who never gave up their faith and determination to live according to the Sikh Rehat.." Life is an opportunity, it is a gift we each get to use just so long as God continues to breathe in us, to experience His Creation and to remember: all things come from God and all things shall return to God, including us. May we do so consciously.

What should we ask the family about what they would like to do?

Each family may practice things slightly differently. Especially if they are non-orthodox Sikhs or belonging to a sect associated to Sikhism. It is important therefore to ask them question around these following subject so as to ascertain how the needs are to be met of the family.

- Procedures prior to death
- Procedures at the time of death and after death
- The role of the family
- Spiritual needs
- Physical needs