

# The Cherry Blossom Family: Evaluating the Impact of a Bereavement and Lactation Support Program for Grieving Mothers after a Perinatal Loss

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## Introduction

- **Loss of a child is devastating**, and those who experience miscarriage, termination, stillbirth, or death of an infant are no exception
- Mothers' bodies will progress through lactogenesis and they will have to navigate **extra challenge of having a milk supply but no longer having a baby to feed**
- Studies have shown **benefits to grieving mothers who express and donate their breastmilk**, but many are not aware of/pursue this option
- The **Cherry Blossom Family (CBF)** program was created by the University of California Health Milk Bank with **goal of providing grieving mothers information about lactation and a free breast pump**
- Goal of our study is to evaluate if CBF program is **effective at filling void** in lactation education and support after loss and to **better understand how healthcare providers can further improve**

## Results Three Primary Themes

*"I hate saying the words, 'It's okay, or it'll be okay,' because it'll never be okay. This is never... it's never going to be at all. But finding the people to put in your corner is a big thing, and that helps [you] get through the terrible days... and it will never be okay, but you will be okay."*

*"The last day when I stopped pumping, I collected all my supplies and drove to the donation center. I took a picture. I was pretty happy. I also took a picture of the milk bags, the ultrasound, the footprints... The entire journey helped me a lot, it healed me a lot. I was working with two therapists at [the] time, but the entire pumping journey was probably what was holding me alive. I was somewhat suicidal. Of course, I thought, well, you know, it's normal. My baby died. I should have, too... This whole pumping routine [was] probably what was keeping me alive. I don't know if I would have made it without it."*

*"Thank you for calling us moms. It means a lot. You don't get it often when you lose a baby. It's hard for all the people to recognize when you don't have anything in your hands. So thank you."*

*"Instead of saying normal. It's 'this is our version of normal.'"*

### Grief Is a Journey

- Importance of mental health care
- Potential benefit of support from those who have had similar loss

*"We lost our baby, and then we lost our livelihood. We lost our savings. People don't... they kind of overlook all that because the focus is the baby, and it always should be... but there's so much more to it. And I think that's [why] people do also feel alone... [it's] when they do go back to their everyday life... whatever they sacrificed for their baby, they have to grieve that now, too."*

### Milk Donation Helps with the Healing Process

- Brings meaning to loss
- Reminds them they are mothers

*"Just being able to send that off and feel so good... that all this had a purpose. And of course he had a purpose. He's part of our family. But it just... you know, [it] felt good to be able to help another mom and another baby."*

### Lessons for Healthcare Providers

- Personalize their journey
- Reach out to these families after loss

*"I feel like an ambassador or somebody to come in and just... just really advocate for that family and be like, 'I'm going to help walk you through this. And I'm going to make sure that we do everything, so that you're not... you don't look back 6 months... [in] 5 years, and wish we did that.' I didn't know that was possible, because you're not thinking in that moment... you're just like, 'how do I survive? How do I take one step at a time?'"*

## Methods

- Interviewed mothers who received support from the CBF program
  - Semi-structured guide
  - English- and Spanish-speaking interviewers
- Employed thematic analysis to identify conceptual themes

## Discussion

- We recognize importance of providing mothers and their families lactation and bereavement support after a perinatal loss
- CBF program has made strides towards improving this support, but more work is needed
  - Provide mental health resources
  - Connect bereaved mothers
  - Stay in contact

For more information about the Cherry Blossom Family, please scan the QR code



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