



Stillbirth Happens – let's talk

E04: Grief has no timeline

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ERIN: Hi, I'm Erin.

JAIME: And I'm Jaime. Welcome to our podcast: Stillbirth Happens - let's talk.

ERIN: We assume since you're here that your life has been touched by stillbirth in some way. Welcome. We want this to be a safe space for you.

JAIME: This is a space where it's okay to cry and to hold the memory of your baby close. The first family holiday after a loss, first birthday, first tooth, first steps. All the milestones you had expected for your new baby that did not come to pass.

ERIN: Depending on where you are in your stillbirth journey, you may already know what it's like to navigate the firsts, or this might be something that's still ahead for you. It's true what they say, the first year after a loss is tough, but it's also profound and transformative.

JAIME: I totally agree, Erin. The grief you experience after stillbirth truly has no timeline.

Our guest today is Emma Hansen. You may know her as the daughter of BC Paralympian, Rick Hansen, as a model, or as an author. The role closest to her heart though is Emma is mama to three: Reid, who was stillborn in 2015, Everett, who is six years old, and Atticus who is three years old. After Reid was born still, Emma processed her grief, in part, by writing blogs and eventually a book that chronicles her pregnancy with Reid, Reid's stillbirth, and the first years after. It is a pleasure having Emma join us today.

Hi, Emma. I wanted to say it's so great to see you. We met in 2015 at a conference that I was helping organize for the I.S.A., the International Stillbirth Alliance. And, I remember meeting you and we met for coffee about a week later, I think, and I just have followed your story over the years and have been quite inspired with how you have shared Reid and his story and I think of you often. And so, I'm so happy that we can reconnect here today.

EMMA: Oh, Jaime, it's such an honour and a privilege and yeah, I still like, I think back to that time that we met at that coffee shop. It was during my first year of grief and you were one of the first people that I got to sit and meet with in my hometown, go walk for a coffee and sit with someone who had a similar lived experience. And that was just so special. And so it's wonderful to be able to sit here and talk, and thank you Jaime and Erin for having me.

ERIN: So, the connection that you were talking about is the same connection I had with Jaime of just, you didn't have to say anything, felt safe, felt protected.

JAIME: And I think what's so important for everybody to know is that we all have our own stories and our own unique experiences, and everybody's story is different, but we're able to come together because we have shared lived experiences and being able to talk and share about them is just so very valuable.

EMMA: Absolutely.

[music interlude]

JAIME: So Emma, your blog in 2015, and then your memoir told the whole story very candidly of what happened with Reid's stillbirth. For those who have not read either one, would you share a bit about what happened?

EMMA: Yeah, so it was like textbook perfect pregnancy and that changed when I woke up at 39 weeks and six days pregnant. And I didn't feel my son Reid kicking, which was unusual. I had woken up, I was woken up by his kicks every morning from the first day that I felt him really moving. And when we went to the hospital to, to check to see if everything was okay. That was when we heard those, the worst words that I'll ever hear when the doctor said that "so sorry, but your baby is dead".

And that, that experience is one that I will, I've written books and I've written blogs about it, but I'll never really be able to convey exactly what everything was like after that or what even what that moment was like. It's like you step outside of your body and you are watching yourself in the room processing that your once healthy baby, just moments before, is dead.

And we're given options: go home and rest, be induced. And we chose to start the induction through the Cervidil insert. But I went home and contractions started pretty much right away, and this was the day before his due date. And I was labouring at home until the contractions got strong enough that I felt I

needed support. So I went to the hospital and things progressed and it was April 4th at 2:24 in the morning when he was born.

[music interlude]

EMMA: And in the room, I had my doula and my midwife, and I had been told before he was born that my midwife had also lost a child and I keep thinking back to how that made all the difference in my birth experience. Having someone in the room who knew who, who understood, you know, what I needed, what kind of support I needed, which oftentimes is not consoling, it's comfort.

So she provided the comfort I needed, which was just her being there and helping us dress him, and giving us the moments to create memories with him while he was there. And after he was born, we had to say goodbye.

I think his birth was beautiful. It unfolded in many ways exactly like I had imagined his birth would. The room was filled with peace and comfort and people that loved us, and my husband was there and he got to cut the cord and we got that experience. And of course it was different, but there was a lot that was really beautiful. There was a lot, and I wrote this in my, in his birth story. He was born. He was still born and it was the saying goodbye that nothing could have prepared me for. I don't think anyone can ever prepare you for that.

[music interlude]

Emma: When we got home, the one thing that I immediately turned to was writing and writing down what had happened, what I was feeling. Writing's always been my creative mode of choice. You know, I think all arts are fantastic tools for helping us integrate our losses into our lives after loss, and this is the first time I'd started writing in this new way about grief about, about pain, about emotions. I mean different than journaling emotions. And as I kept writing, the feelings came up, and then the feeling kind of became expression, and that expression became a story. And then it was in that story, I wouldn't dare yet say it was healing, but it felt like the beginning of healing.

ERIN: It's like a labour of love, really...

EMMA: Mm-hmm.

ERIN: Right. So in this episode, we're calling this one, *Grief has No Timeline*. We're acknowledging that the first year after stillbirth is very hard. And of course we know grief does not suddenly just disappear after a calendar year, but the first year of everything, like the markers, events, things that you have to let go of one by one. So, can you talk about a little bit in the first year, after Reid died? What was it like when you were getting these words out on paper and typing it out?

EMMA: Yeah. The first year. One of the first books I read after Reid died, it was called *Second Firsts*, it's the idea that you experience everything for the, the second, first time again after the death of a loved one.

And so that first year was full of those second firsts, and it happened from the moment that we came home again after he was born. Walking into the building for the second, first time. So I felt like that first year was really marked by those second firsts, and most of the current information that like we have accessible to us about the mechanics of grief or like the tangible things we can do to support us in our grief are for someone who has died after they're born. So even regarding marking anniversaries or birthdays, it's people often look to doing things that their loved one who has died loved doing like, visiting places that they loved visiting or eating the foods that they loved or playing the songs they had on repeat, so you can feel close to them.

Everything that I had was an example of a, the person had a presence that had memories attached to it, and so then you could go back and do those things to feel close to them. So I felt this real, like, what do I do? I wanted a manual, I wanted to, what do I do? What can I do? How do I move forward?

And our plan was, we would have Reid and I would take that first year; I was working as a model, mostly a fashion model. And so being self-employed, the plan was just to take the year and spend as much time with him as I could. And then we would move from there, I'd go back to work, he would go to care. And so after he died, I was sitting with this empty year in front of me. And I think in the beginning I thought that, I did think that like grief was something to, that you had to get over, that you had to heal, that you, I had to move on from my loss. You know, I knew about the five stages of grief and I thought that, I think what most people think, which is that you move from anger to denial, to bargaining, to depression, and then end up like acceptance all fixed and shiny and happy and new.

I was like, okay, so here's my roadmap. I'll follow this and if I do these things, then it'll be all good, and obviously that is not how that goes. Healing after stillbirth is not linear. Grief is not linear. You don't go from denial to acceptance and arrive healed. I didn't learn this until much later.

I learned a lot of this in that first year just through trial and error, but I read later, Megan Devine wrote in her book about the stages of grief. The stages were meant to normalize and validate what someone might experience, not what they should, and the order that they should have. Grief is as individual as love. Every life, every path is unique. And I read that and I thought that is what I was trying to do in that first year was find a way to feel those stages - I was feeling those stages, but not in that order and not as neatly or as organized.

Reading that really helped. But the main thing that I wanted in that first year was I wanted to find meaning. So what we did was we created a hashtag, it

was #ninemonthswithReid, and it came to be that in that first month after he died, I was looking through my phone, looking at my photos, and like my calendar, I have everything like inputted into my calendar so that I can remember what I'm doing. But as I was looking back on each month's birthday, you know, each, like the one month, the two month mark, I was doing something with a member of our family or a friend. And so, what I did in the months after he had died, so the first month without, or the first month missing him is what I like to say. So the first month missing him, we would go and revisit that place that I was, or with the person that I was, and we would put the sticker and the one month sticker that I was going to put on his onesie to take his growth pictures as he grew.

And so we did that from month one up until month nine. Then we went and visited and put the sticker on his car seat. And that was, yeah, just another way to try to find meaning. I wanted to live in a way that honoured his life and made him part of our present. It's was a different way of parenting him and keeping him close and also include others.

Because one of the big things after is that the focus was on me. People would ask me how I was doing, sometimes even forgetting to ask my husband, Aaron, and I think that's something that people often overlook is that a lot of people in the birthing person's community are grieving that baby as well.

[music]

JAIME: Absolutely. I know that your friends and family members and people from all over wrote letters to read on the occasion of his first birthday, the anniversary of his being born still.

You called them *Reid's Reads* and each one contained a lovely meditation on what he meant to that particular person. And you yourself also wrote him a beautiful letter. We're wondering if we can ask you to read it.

EMMA: Yeah, absolutely. I would love to.

[music]

Dearest Reid,

Today, you are one. Today, you are celebrated beyond measure. Today, you are inspiring us all. On this day, last year under the blood red glow of that big, full moon, I held you in my arms for the first time. The room was quiet. No violent cries from you or from me. Only silent tears that slid down my cheeks.

Baby. I have never seen such perfection. That day was the greatest and the worst of my life, and I'd live it all over again to have your heart beat one more time. On this day last year, I birthed you, my child. But it was also my own

birth into motherhood. Oh, how being your mama has changed me, destroyed me in the most beautiful way. You have opened me up and altered my very core. And you have done it with such fire and grace. You have sparked a flame for truthfulness and honesty inside me. One that's quickly taken over and grown into the gift of veracity.

Now, because of you, I'd rather show the world honest tears than a lie of a smile. I'd rather write stories laced with pain than happy ones that only narrate half the truth. When my own words fail me and grief has taken hold of my heart, I remember that during the some 53 million heartbeats we did get with you, the words of *Reid's Reads* prevailed.

This is still true today, so nothing has changed. Not really. You were born still, but you were still born, so you are still loved, you are still growing, you are still Reid.

Love you to the moon and back, baby boy, your legacy is boundless in this world. Your life is endless in our hearts.

Sincerely, Mama

ERIN: Ooh, unbelievable.

JAIME: It's such an honour, Emma, for you to share that with us. For you to have shared so many of your words, you say there were no words that moment in the hospital, because there isn't. The three of us, we just understand that because we've been there. The words that you do share resonate so very much and are so appreciated. Because for many, we have those feelings, but it's hard for us to put those words down.

EMMA: No, it's, it was the privilege of that time that I know that year, that empty year in front of me of researching and reading and doing and meeting with other bereaved parents. That was a privilege of that time and space where I could learn differently over those years. And as I could put language to what I was experiencing and share that like, it transformed not only my understanding of grief, my understanding of motherhood too, even.

After Reid died, I definitely spent a lot of time, too much time, questioning my motherhood. Am I a mother? Am I a mother, even though my child was not in my arms? And sharing that I was getting people's stories and so I was receiving that support and love and community from other people sharing their stories and how amazing I was able to put it out there and have people just receive, like hold space for that and receive that.

ERIN: So you had mentioned earlier about your first year was about learning. So now that you are a trained doula who supports other parents and parents who have

experienced stillbirth, what does it mean to you now to do this kind of work with other families?

EMMA: Yeah, so in sharing through my blog, I received countless messages from people who had experienced stillbirth and also their loved ones. You know, people wanting to know how can they support their own people through stillbirth. And I did not have the capacity to respond individually to each message.

So, as I was trying to figure out finding meaning in this first year, or actually the first two years after Reid's death, writing my book felt like a very obvious answer to me. If I could put it into words that would support somebody and support their loved ones in supporting them, that felt like a very obvious answer to me to, to support people.

The trainings that I did, I later did my training as a full spectrum doula as well, because as I did my birth doula training, I realized that one of the main things that was missing from that training was supporting people through death. I think that if you're going to be a doula and you're gonna support people through these life transitions, you need to be prepared to support the full spectrum from conception through 'till death. Because if you're gonna be there in that room, doulas are often the only people who will know what the options are, will know what could be supportive to a family. So I felt like, with the training I'd received that my book was like my way of "doula-ing" as many families as I possibly could.

JAIME: What are some of the things you counsel other families to do to help them through the first year, the first difficult year, and just generally to get used to their new normal?

EMMA: There's no one size fits all. I think it's important like to know that living life, in grief, is not living less of a life. Happy doesn't need to be our default. We just need to learn how to grieve healthily, and that looks different for everyone, but there are some key things I think that can be supportive to most families. Like nurturing yourself. Eating food, drinking water. The basics that are actually so important and also feel like the most impossible thing when you're in that acute, like the first, the early days of grief that feels impossible. Nurturing, like I said, comforting well, but consoling carefully, offer that comfort without trying to fix it. Without trying to look for the silver linings and the bright sides.

And that's not to say that hope isn't really important in those early days. Hope is so important for us as humans. But finding that balance between the sitting and the grief and the feeling you're feeling without really trying to figure out what's next. It's really important to sit in that grief and also feel, be supported in that grief.

Assemble a team around you, whatever that team can be, whether it's through podcasts or mental health experts, your, your medical team, your loved ones, your family. Whatever feels supportive, go there. Whatever doesn't feel

supportive, step back. Just look after yourself and find validation. Like I said, I was extremely lucky that what I put out was validated. Looking for the tiny joys, what are some tiny joys?

ERIN: Yeah.

Jaime: Each of us is going to ha... take our own journey and do what's right for each of us and what feels right.

Emma: Yeah.

Erin: Mm-hmm. One of the things that I learned in my first year of grief, and you say it much more eloquently than I do, okay, but, and it is, it's finding the balance between grieving and still carrying on with your day-to-day daily tasks. And my first year, I had to use sticky notes to remind myself to eat or to take my daughter to the park or do the laundry. But one of the things that I finally did learn as well, going through the grief in the first year and years after was that it was actually okay to sit there in my anger or to sit there and be sad or sit there and just enjoy the quiet learning to love the quiet again. So I, I have this little silky saying it's okay to 'sit in the shit of it'.

EMMA: Yes!

ERIN: And you need just to be in the moment and that's okay. Instead of... I found a lot of people may have been uncomfortable if they saw me upset, or mad and they didn't know what to do with it. And it's okay that they're angry, it's okay that they're crying. This is the shit of it, of us missing our babies.

EMMA: Yeah, absolutely. You know, and I learned that there was a difference between sitting in those feelings and that grief and writing about them. Or, doing the things, learning new things. There's a difference between really sitting in those hard feelings and these are feelings that you can't just push aside and hide, and it seems so obvious, and yet I think it's something that most people did not learn when they were growing up. Is that, all the feelings are valid and have a space and they need to come out in a healthy way. Like, you can still set boundaries on what are healthy ways to express those feelings or feel those feelings, but they still need to be felt or they're gonna come up in other ways.

ERIN: All hard work really...

EMMA: Very hard work. Some of the hardest work, I think that a grieving person will do is to actually feel those hard feelings.

ERIN: Mm-hmm.

JAIME: I have a question. So you did do a lot of writing and you have shared that your letter, your blog, your book... How did the writing affect you?

EMMA: The writing helped put names to those feelings. Sometimes there were so many feelings. Is this anger? Is this, am I sad about this? Am I jealous? Sometimes I didn't know until I actually sat down and spent the time writing about those feelings. Before I could actually name them and then that felt better. It almost gave a sense of control over the story. Okay, I know what I'm feeling, you know, I know what this means. I'm processing this. And it gave me a way to move forward.

So, it felt like my way of marking those anniversaries and memories as being significant and being valid. And, I like to say that different than, not less than. Because I think that people often like to categorize stillbirth as that's less of a loss because you don't have those, the memories that were shared with other people.

And so, I was trying to find ways in my writing and in my doing to make sense of that, that there's so many different ways to grieve and to mark those milestones that can evolve over time too. And I just wanna say that you can do it loudly. And you can do it really quietly and it's not, it's not less important.

Over the years we, obviously *Reid's Reads* is what we did on the first year. The second year I donated milk to support babies in NICUs 'cuz after Everett was born, he spent time with NICU and I... Donating milk was something that I kind of wish that I knew I could do after Reid died. So, you know, I did that on a second birthday.

And then on his third birthday, that was kind of the first year where we did something a little more quiet, a little more intimate, and that first year that we did that, I definitely wrestled with those feelings of like, am I doing enough? You know, is this big enough to mark his birthday? I think birthdays sometimes feel like such sacred things, 'cuz they're one of the few days where I feel like that focus can be all on your child and...

ERIN: mm-hmm.

EMMA: But over the years now, we're year eight, we just celebrated Reid's eighth birthday. Still right, we still celebrate him, but the, the birthdays and the anniversaries look different now, and I think that what you need in each year of grief changes. The way I like to think about it is like what my living children want on their birthdays as they grow older changes. Every year is different. And so, it feels very nurturing and natural to just see where each year is and if you're feeling close to your child then that's, that's what matters.

JAIME: Exactly. And that's exactly how we take it each year too. You know, sometimes it's okay, he would be 10 this year, what would he want for dinner on a 10th birthday?

EMMA: Yes.

JAIME: Or dessert. And so we make it about what would he want to be sharing with us on this day.

JAIME: And that's often what we do. So, some years it's more, some years it's less, but...

EMMA: mm-hmm

JAIME: It's always, they're always with us and it's their day.

EMMA: Yeah.

JAIME: And I have to share with you just that you and Reid have impacted me a lot and helped me a lot, and there's a, an intersection that I always smile when I see it because it's *Reid's Corner* and that's what this sign says and every time I see that sign, I think of Reid and I think of you.

EMMA: I love that. That's, it's actually something I do too. I have an album in my phone titled Reid, and it's just of all the, sometimes like I'll be parked and a car will drive by and it's like Reid's Plumbing. So, I'll take a quick picture. I have all these pictures in my phone of places where I've seen Reid's name come up. And I think that's something that we like to do. It's just like a moment where I feel really close to him that there's these little pieces where he exists in the world that I can feel close to him.

And you know, some, for some people it's... and things like they see hearts and when they see a heart, they feel close to their child or butterflies. I had a really strange encounter with a butterfly where I was pregnant with my second son, Everett, and a butterfly was following me on a walk and I kept going and coming back and eventually landed on my hand, which was right near my belly and stayed there for, for minutes and like long enough that I could take a picture.

Things like that where there's things that happen where you're like, that's just a mystery that if I lean into it, it feels like I feel close to my son. I feel close to my child that's died. And I think those moments are, are really beautiful. And like those are those tiny joys, right? That you know, doesn't take away from the grief. It doesn't make the loss better. It doesn't make it okay that he's died. Those things that moment being beautiful and the grief being profound, those happen at the same time.

JAIME: Absolutely.

ERIN: Yes

JAIME: Given all that you've learned from your own experience and from helping others who are going through this, what do you ultimately think grief is?

EMMA: Something that I learned is that grief is love. Grief, and I, there's like the saying that "grief is love with no place to go". And, I love that because dying doesn't end a relationship. You know, the relationship changes. That person is still going to be that person to you. They're still gonna feel that space in your heart, and you still have all that love for them, and they're still just as important to you and you want them to be part of your present.

I think that when we find ways to live in grief, it transfers into all other aspects of our life. I think we're all gonna encounter really hard things, and grief and we're all gonna struggle. And it's really important to know how to live with that still and how to find that love, right? Like how to move forward with that grief.

And, I was actually listening to a podcast the other day. It was the *On Being* podcast. Sometimes I just scroll through looking for podcast episodes about grief because you know, there are moments when you just need to sit there and and feel it, and there's different feelings that come up every time.

But it was Dr. Rachel Naomi Reman. She said, "the fact is life is full of losses and disappointments, and the art of living is to make of them something that can nourish others." And I just thought that was really beautiful, that we're all gonna experience like losses and disappointments. How do we nourish others in it? How do we nourish ourselves in it?

How do we, how do we still live with grief, and live fully. You know, not less of a life, right? It's, it's not like our life is on hold when we're grieving. And I think that's something that people might think is that I'm actively grieving, my life is on hold. Like this is still living, when you are grieving, you are still living. And it requires very specific ways of moving through the world. And it's still living. The grief is still love. It's different.

JAIME: I love that.

ERIN: The grief is still living. I don't know if I've ever heard in my 13 years now, almost 13 years being a bereaved mom, if I've ever heard it put quite like that.

JAIME: Mm.

ERIN: But yeah, cuz we're not stuck, we're not in this...

EMMA: mm-hmm.

ERIN: terrible place all the time. And I always said, I think I like myself more now than I did before my daughter passed away. Like, the richness of everything that I've learned and the being okay with everything that you learn. But yeah...

JAIME: The authenticity for sure.

Erin: The authenticity, yeah.

JAIME: Yeah.

ERIN: And you've helped so many people start to learn that with your words. So thank you so much, Emma.

EMMA: Thank you.

JAIME: Thank you for being with us here today and sharing so much of yourself and so much of Reid and your family. We really appreciate it.

EMMA: No, it's uh, it's a gift. I think that these are moments that feel really important and like such an honour and such a privilege. So, thank you for inviting me on this podcast and I hope that people can take and leave what they need in everything we've talked about and come away feeling supported.

ERIN: Absolutely. And thank *you* so much for staying with us to witness Emma Hansen's telling her story, the story of Reid. Of the support she got from her family, and of finding her way through that harrowing first year after he was stillborn.

JAIME: There's so much hope in Emma's story. Wherever you are in your journey, our hope for you is that you know you're not alone and that your grief will continue to evolve and connect you with your love in different ways as time passes. Please join us whenever you can and share this podcast with anyone who needs it.