

Pregnancy loss support

The loss of a life unlived

By Mandy Rodrigues, Clinical Psychologist, specialising in fertility.

The loss of a pregnancy at any stage is the loss of memories we have in the future. We don't find comfort in fond memories. With pregnancy loss there is grief for what could have been or what should have been. As soon as we make the decision to create our family, we start laying down the foundations and creating a vision of the journey we are about to take. The decision to have a baby is a lifetime commitment which is why so many of our values, hopes, and expectations come to the fore.

These are emotionally laden values, and when we lose our baby, it is considered a life trauma. We made a decision to enter a new stage in our lives, not just a transient adventure.

We booked our ultrasounds and established an estimated due date. We imagined our gender reveal, our baby shower, our birth, and our family growing in the years ahead. We probably diarised each doctor's visit, and some started planning maternity leave and babymoons. Each of these remains a potential trigger into the future of our grief.

Roughly **1 in 4 women experience a pregnancy loss**. This might be an early pregnancy loss due to an abnormality detected in utero, a late miscarriage, or a still birth. We have a quarter of women going through a trauma that is not often spoken about. Some of these women or couples may find themselves alone, struggling for support, depressed and uncertain, coupled with feelings of guilt.

Phases of grief:*



Shock

The initial reaction to your loss is one of shock. These are moments of numbness, tears, and denial. This is the acute reaction to any loss. You may find yourself completely indifferent one minute and crying uncontrollably the next. You may wake up in the morning and have to remind yourself you are no longer pregnant.



Bargain

The most intense phase of the grief cycle is the bargaining phase. This is where you look for answers as to why this has happened. You hope for a medical explanation. You feel that if you had a medical reason, then there would be more clarity on how to avoid this going forward. We might question our religion and our bodies.



Anger

We then get angry. This is the time you find you might be irritable with your partner or impatient with others. You find yourself withdrawing from others.



Depression

This is usually followed by a period of depression. You long to move on to acceptance but find there are so many reminders going forward that you cannot imagine feeling certain about your future as a parent.

* Everyone experiences grief in a different way and you may not follow these standard phases of grief. If this is not your experience, you are not alone, the grief process is very personal and unique to each individual.



You are going through this intense trauma and in parallel, you are desperately wanting to fall pregnant again but find yourself frozen with fear.

You are not alone, support is available.

Loss as a parenting pair

Within a relationship, men and women do cope differently with loss. Men might react with shock and then anger. Women tend to blame themselves and internalise their feelings. Loss in itself does not create conflict, but it is management of the loss going forward that creates tension. It is highly recommended that you seek support if you feel you and your partner are coping differently to the point that this creates tension in the relationship.

Those around you also don't understand your loss. They may avoid talking about it or may be perceived as insensitive. Always keep in mind that those around you don't know what to say or may say something insensitive to mask their discomfort.

Pregnancy loss is a trauma and, therefore, support is essential even if you may not want to talk to anyone. However, resources are available to help you understand the options for the future, and to speak to others who can support you.

Support toolbox:

After losing a pregnancy, there are many unanswered questions. As humans, we may want answers because that helps us navigate the future with more certainty.

- 50% of all miscarriages are due to a chromosomal abnormality. **Products of Conception (POC) Screening** can provide you and your doctor with information for future planning. POC may give answers to those suffering a pregnancy loss and help doctors assess your future risk and determine the next step forward.
- Seeing a **genetic counsellor** can provide support in the form of information about your loss, as well as information about how that loss might affect future pregnancies. They are a great resource for understanding how certain genetic conditions might affect you or your family.
- There are various **days of remembrance** and it is encouraged to partake in these to honour your baby and to find comfort or solace in knowing that you are not alone.

9-15 October: Baby Loss Awareness Week is a special opportunity to mark the lives of babies lost in pregnancy or soon after birth.



15 October: The Wave of Light invites baby loss families, friends, loved ones and supporting organisations from around the world to join in honour and remembrance on October 15 at 7pm, in all time zones. In the first time zone, illuminations and candles remain lit for at least one hour, with the next time zone lighting in its turn. This moves westward as the Wave of Light circumnavigates the globe. Buildings, landmarks, monuments, and venues are illuminated while individuals, families, friends, and supporting organisations participate in lighting candles in remembrance.



It is strongly recommended you seek emotional support in some form. This will help you cope with your loss, and it may help you with managing the anxiety and fear you might experience in your next pregnancy.