

The Miscarriage Association



Acknowledging Pregnancy Loss

Pregnancy loss: how you might feel

If you would like information, support or simply to talk to someone who has had a miscarriage and can understand, please contact:

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Pregnancy loss: how you might feel

In this leaflet you can read how some women and their partners have felt after losing a baby. Some have miscarried early in pregnancy, others later; some have been through an ectopic or molar pregnancy; and for some there are circumstances that make their loss even harder to bear – fertility problems, for example, or some other difficulty in their lives.

Reading how other people have felt may help you think more clearly about what has happened to you and about how you feel. You will almost certainly find that some people have had similar feelings to yours, and that can be reassuring. But the experience of miscarriage* is different for everyone. What the loss of your baby means to you, and how you feel about it, will be shaped by all kinds of things to do with the person you are and your particular circumstances. So, although you will probably find you share a lot with others, it's important to remember that no one else's experience of miscarriage will be exactly like yours.

How you might feel

I've never cried so much in my whole life. I was walking about with an empty feeling where I should have been holding my baby.

I keep on thinking it's a punishment. I must have done something wrong.

After the operation [for the ectopic], I was in complete shock – I had just found out I was pregnant and then it was suddenly all over. Not only had I lost the baby but I also felt physically damaged. Afterwards I focused on recovering physically, but emotionally I was completely numb.

I wasn't sure if I was pregnant, so when it happened it was a shock and a relief at that time. After a few days I just carried on as normal.

I felt completely powerless and wasted. Vicki was terribly upset and having a lot of pain too. I wanted to rescue her or take away the pain, and I couldn't do a damn thing except watch her cry.

I feel so empty and lost. I wonder if I'm going mad.

You may be able to identify with some of these quotes. A miscarriage is not a major event for everyone, but it is for many, and most people are left with feelings of great sadness and regret. Many also feel shocked and confused. Some feel angry. Others feel guilty and wonder whether they have been responsible in some way. Some talk about feelings of emptiness, longing, loneliness and a lack of self-confidence. Others feel stressed, panicky and out of control.

*To make this leaflet easier to read, we generally use the word 'miscarriage' for all forms of pregnancy loss, including ectopic and molar pregnancy. Whatever your circumstances, we hope this leaflet will be helpful.

For some, their feelings are intense but not overwhelming. Others are devastated by what they feel and for a time feel barely able to cope. Everyday tasks, whether at home or at work, can seem impossible to manage – or not worth doing. The world can feel turned upside down.

It is also common to feel loss in physical ways. A lot of women find they feel very tired – even some time after the miscarriage. You may also have headaches or stomach aches, feel short of breath or tight in the chest, be constipated, have diarrhoea, or find it hard to sleep. These symptoms will probably disappear in time, but if you feel worried, talk to your GP.

A particular kind of loss

Miscarriage is a particular kind of loss and brings particular feelings.

After a miscarriage, you grieve for a person you never knew, and for a relationship that ended before it really began. You grieve not for a person who has lived and died but for an un-lived life. You grieve for the loss of your future as the parent of the baby who has died. You are sad not just because of what you have lost but because of what will never be.

This is different to grieving for, say, an elderly person who has died, and it can be hard for people who have no experience of miscarriage to understand.

Grieving after an early miscarriage can also be difficult because the strength of your feelings may seem out of proportion to what has happened to you physically. You are grieving for the loss of your baby, yet at the time of your loss, your baby may have only just begun to grow.

You think there is a child inside you and there never really was one. But this woman [at the miscarriage support group] said, 'Well, there was to you. It was a real person to you and you have a right to grieve for it.' And I felt tremendously relieved.

In the scan room, I had expected to see our baby kicking and waving furiously. Instead, nothing.

But sometimes after an early miscarriage, women are taken aback to discover that what they have lost is a recognisable baby, and this too can be shocking and hard to accept.

An unborn baby in a little sac, all curled up, with dark eyes and fingers. I couldn't believe it would be like that but it was.

Grief after a miscarriage is also different to other sorts of grief because of the physical process you have been through. The loss is physical as well as emotional.

The pain and bleeding did not stop. I was so low, I couldn't stop crying and could not believe that this was happening to me. I couldn't even start to try and come to terms with what was happening because every time I went to the loo, I was reminded of what had happened. Both physically and mentally I was drained, I just couldn't cope any more. Why was this happening to me? I felt I was being punished.

. . . After three days, my milk came in . . . That seemed to be a knife twisting in the wound even more. It reminded me even more of my lost baby.

Even after the immediate experience of loss, you are likely to feel sore and tired for some time, and this can make it harder to cope with emotions.

I am finding it difficult to cope and even everyday tasks seem to be getting on top of me. I feel extremely tired all of the time and get uptight and panic at minor things – this is very unlike me as I am normally a very calm person.

Another way in which grief after the loss of a baby is different to other kinds of grief is that you might be thinking about the possibility of another pregnancy in the future. So your feelings about what has happened may be mixed with anxieties about why it happened, whether and when you might conceive again, and if you do conceive, whether you might lose the next baby too. Some women are not affected like this and feel confident about trying again:

I think it's just a natural thing. Lots of people miscarry and sometimes it's for the best. So I'd rather it hadn't happened, but we'll just try again and hope for better luck next time.

But for others, the need for a baby is overwhelming, and the future may be worrying and even frightening:

(After a molar pregnancy) I was told not to get pregnant for a year and I can honestly say that having to wait this period is twice as bad as the chemo! Although my head tells me this is the right course of action, my heart says this is impossible for me. My need for a baby is a physical pain.

The worst feeling is that I don't feel I could face the possibility of a next time . . . how I would handle it if the same thing happened again. I don't know how other men react.

I want to feel me again, but I can't. I feel I won't be happy until I fall pregnant again, but because I want it so much, I feel I won't get it.

There are no rules

When you hear women talking about their feelings after a miscarriage, they often say things like 'I think I should be over it by now', or 'Is it normal to feel this way?' or 'I know people who've been through much worse than this. Why am I feeling so low?' But there are no rules about how you should feel after a miscarriage, and no rules which say that some experiences of miscarriage are less upsetting and others more so.

For example, it isn't necessarily true that an early miscarriage is less distressing – although for some people it does seem to be that way. Women who miscarry early in pregnancy sometimes say that, if it had to happen, they are glad it happened early. But an early loss can mean a great deal, and for some women and their partners, it is devastating.

I miscarried at seven weeks and I still feel so empty. I have dreams about my baby and cry all the time. Everyone seems to think I should be able to 'move on'.

One reason why people believe that an early miscarriage is easier is that the longer you are pregnant, the more attached you may become to your baby. But for some women, even a very early miscarriage is the loss of a baby they felt they already knew and loved.

I can't believe that a week ago there was a new life growing inside me and now there is nothing. My family have just said 'at least it happened early on' and 'it was only a bunch of cells'. I know they're only trying to help but to my husband and me it was a baby and it was going to be our son or daughter.

No matter when the miscarriage happens, the sadness is always intense if the baby was particularly precious or significant. For example, miscarrying a baby after treatment for infertility is especially hard:

I know a miscarriage is an awful thing to happen to anyone, but it was all so much worse for us because we'd waited so long to get pregnant in the first place and I didn't know if I'd ever be able to conceive again.

For women or couples who have had a number of miscarriages, there can be similar feelings of despair. It can be harder to recover from a second or third loss, and for some, the need for a successful pregnancy becomes overwhelming.

I have now suffered three miscarriages within the last year. My first and third babies were both lost at twelve weeks and were both missed miscarriages. My second baby was an early miscarriage at six weeks. I desperately want a baby, but fear the total devastation that another miscarriage would bring.

Having a child already is a great comfort, but it also makes me realise just what has been lost with the four miscarriages. I feel overwhelmed with grief but I also know that I will continue to try and complete my family.

It can also make the loss harder if there are other difficulties in your life. Some women go through the distress of losing a baby without a partner, or maybe with a partner who is unsympathetic, and this can feel very lonely. Sometimes pregnancy loss causes a split in a relationship, so there is a double loss. And sometimes there are other losses which add to the sadness:

My father died not long before we conceived the baby, and if it had been a boy, I would have named him after my dad. But I miscarried at eleven weeks, and it was like my dad dying all over again.

There are some women and their partners who didn't have strong feelings about their pregnancy, or maybe didn't even want to be pregnant, and who are then taken aback by how shocked and distressed they feel when they miscarry.

I did not even know that I was pregnant yet my sadness is great and I have a heavy feeling of loss that I am carrying around. Is it normal even though I didn't know I was pregnant to feel sad, depressed and as though someone has died? I don't feel as though I should be allowed to grieve.

After finding out I was pregnant I chose to have a termination which felt right for me at the time. However, following my decision I began to miscarry. I was convinced that I was fine with it all and preferred to miscarry than to have a termination anyway. But now I get floods of emotion and cry about what has happened.

It is important not to compare yourself with other people, or feel that you should be reacting in a certain way. There is no 'right' way to behave. You can probably help yourself best by accepting your feelings for what they are. You don't need to justify the way you feel, judge yourself, or apologise for it.

How long will I feel like this?

It seems as though every question to do with feelings after a miscarriage can only be answered with 'It depends' or 'It varies'. No one can say how long your feelings about your loss may go on. But most women who have been through a miscarriage, and often their partners too, say that their feelings of sadness lasted longer than they expected. Many say that they thought they would be able to move on with their lives sooner.

People around you may also expect you to move on more quickly than you can.

It has now been three months since the miscarriage but I find myself even more lost and emotional than ever before and having to put a brave face on makes it all worse. I'm at rock bottom and have shut myself off from a lot of my friends and family who are naturally too busy with their own lives to help me.

Friends and family have been supportive, but I feel as if everyone's moved on and not necessarily forgotten what happened, but forgotten that I may not have moved on yet. I don't really know what I'm expecting, if anything, from people, and I don't want to wallow in my grief, but I'm finding that all I can think about at the moment is wanting to be pregnant again.

It is not unusual to find that there are bad times even after you have begun to feel generally better and more able to cope.

After suffering an early miscarriage I grieved privately and briefly for about two weeks and although the sadness continued for some time, I felt that I had bravely made it through the worst of it. However, four months after my loss I find myself in a very sad and dark place. I feel empty inside and I don't know why.

Sometimes a bad day comes out of the blue, or there may be a reason – perhaps because a friend becomes pregnant or has a baby, or just because you are feeling tired and low. Anniversaries can be difficult too – such as the anniversary of the time you conceived, the day of a scan, the day of the miscarriage itself, or your expected date of delivery. There may be things you can do on these days. Look at 'Remembering' on page 12 to see if there are ideas that might help.

Even though your feelings may be with you for some time, they will change. Gradually they will become less painful and more bearable.

People around you

It can be difficult to cope if people around you don't seem to understand the way you are feeling. It's not unusual to find that people – even people close to you – expect you to behave in a certain way and are surprised if you behave differently.

Everyone thinks I should be over it by now, that I should just have another baby. But it's this baby I want.

If people seem critical of the way you are, you can begin to feel that you are in the wrong. For example, if enough people suggest you should be putting your loss behind you and getting on with life, you may begin to feel that is what you should be doing.

I was only eight weeks pregnant and I have been told so many horror stories since of people who miscarried much later than me and how lucky I am that none of these things happened to me. When it first happened I listened to all this and took it in and agreed with it, but now I feel like I'm going to slap the next person who tells me I'm lucky, or that there must have been something wrong with it, or that it was fate, or I'm young and I'll be pregnant again soon. I feel because I'm getting all these 'positive' comments, I don't deserve to feel as bad as I'm feeling.

Many women say that it is especially hard to be with friends, or others in the family, who are pregnant or have recently had babies. For a time, the world can seem full of pregnant women and babies.

When I miscarried and she didn't, it put a great strain on our relationship. She felt bad about her continuing pregnancy and I felt bad about her guilt!

My sister-in-law gave birth to a beautiful baby boy. . . . I knew it was something I'd have to cope with, but I was surprised to find how depressed I felt, torn by conflicting emotions. Holding him and seeing the happiness he's brought to the whole family reminded me of what might have been for us.

The responses of your family, friends, and even the people you work with, may be important to you, and when you are feeling sensitive and raw, the wrong words, or the wrong attitudes, can hurt. But sometimes people do not respond or support you in the way you need because they simply don't know what to say or do. They may be frightened of saying the wrong thing – but unable to ask what would be right. If you can manage to explain how you feel and what would help, they may be grateful. Otherwise, look for support from friends who seem to understand better what you are going through.

I think the best people I've spoken to have been best friends of mine, women who can relate to what has happened.

No matter what other people say, try to be aware of what is right for you. Everyone is different and there are no right or wrong ways of behaving. If you have got friends who are supportive and understanding, they may be able to help you work out the best way of coping for you.

Close relationships

Some couples are able to support each other very well and may not even want support from others.

We've been through so much together. I wouldn't wish it on anybody, but it did bring us closer together.

But grief can put a strain on even the strongest relationships, especially over time. You and your partner may both be upset, but in very different ways or at different times. For example, one of you may want to talk, the other may want silence. One may want to get on with life, the other may want to take time out.

It might be that the day when you are feeling better and more able to cope is the exact day that your partner feels particularly bad. The day when you most need support may be the day when your partner feels least able to give it. This can cause a lot of tension and at the very time when you want to be close you can find yourselves feeling angry with each other and arguing.

I had a miscarriage two weeks ago and ever since then I have become very stroppy and angry – particularly at my partner. I'm finding it difficult to cope with our everyday routine of work and home life. This is now beginning to affect our relationship and I guess I am not dealing with it all very well. I have been just trying to get on with it as best as I can but it's obviously not working.

We dealt with it very differently and it came close to splitting us up. We could have coped with the miscarriage, but the subsequent infertility put a strain on us that knocked us for six.

For men, these tensions are sometimes made worse if they feel ignored and excluded:

People call and never ask how I'm doing. It's as if Kate is supposed to have a reaction to the loss but I am not, and it drives me mad.

If you and your partner are feeling pulled apart by the strain, it may help to find support outside your immediate relationship, not as a substitute, but so that you are not totally reliant on each other as a couple. Look at 'Finding support', below.

Sexual relationships

Your sexual relationship with your partner may also be difficult for a while. For some couples making love is comforting and brings them close, but for others it is a reminder of the pregnancy. It is also common for one partner to want to make love – perhaps to show how much they care – but for the other not to want it.

For women in particular, sexual intercourse can be a physical reminder of the pregnancy and the miscarriage, and this can make intercourse difficult for a time.

I had difficulties on each occasion that we tried to make love. I felt guilty that I was trying to enjoy myself soon after losing the baby, but knew that if I didn't start making love again I'd put it off until it became a serious hang-up, so I forced myself to gradually respond again.

Your sexual relationship may also be affected by the question of whether and when to try to conceive again. For some, it feels right to try to conceive quite quickly; others need a space. If you and your partner feel differently about the timing of another pregnancy, it may make it hard for you to be close and can sometimes lead to arguments about the very thing you least want to argue about. Also, if you decide that you do want to conceive again, sex may become stressful:

It's less of a pleasure and more of a job, and I think I don't want to conceive doing this.

It may help you to know that it is not uncommon to have problems with sex for a while. If you are both feeling sad and upset, it is almost bound to affect your sexual relationship, and for a time you may not want each other in the way you used to.

If you begin to feel that the problems are going on too long, think about getting help. You may decide that you want help with your feelings about the miscarriage (see 'Finding support', below); or you may want to contact Relate (see page 13) for help with your relationship.

Finding support

If you are struggling with your feelings, look for some support. You may need to do this immediately after your miscarriage, or later on. Some people look for support months or even years later. Think about what kind of support would suit you best.

Talking...

You may want to talk to someone – maybe your partner, or someone in your family or one of your friends. You may need to tell them that you want to talk and ask them if they would set aside some time.

Perhaps talking to someone less close to you would suit you better. For example, you could try your GP, or you could ask if your GP's practice has a counsellor you could talk to. If you miscarried in hospital, you could ask whether the hospital has a specialist nurse or midwife who would give you

some time, or a bereavement counsellor attached to the maternity or gynaecology departments. You could also ask to talk to the hospital chaplain, or may want to contact your own religious leader. If you lost your baby following fertility treatment, you may want to talk to a counsellor at the fertility clinic.

The Miscarriage Association has a national network of volunteers. These are people who have been through pregnancy loss themselves and can offer support and a listening ear, either over the phone or in a support group. Contact The M.A. by telephone, letter or e-mail to find your nearest support volunteer.

...or not talking

If you feel you have talked enough and need some other kind of support, or if you just don't feel talking would help, think about what else you could do that might help you feel better. Look at the suggestions under 'Remembering' below. Think about how you are spending your days and whether you could be easier on yourself. Looking after yourself physically, eating well, getting some exercise, and giving time to activities you enjoy, may help more than you would imagine.

Information

You may find that what you need most is factual information. You may have a lot of questions, or be worried about something, and reliable information could help. Depending on the kind of information you want, you could contact:

- your GP or practice nurse
- the community midwife
- the hospital staff on the ward or unit where you were treated
- the Miscarriage Association. Helpline staff may be able to provide information, and there is a range of leaflets on different aspects of pregnancy loss.

What happened to your baby?

Some women and their partners do not know what happened to their baby or the remains of their pregnancy after the miscarriage and many want to find out.

The bodies of babies who are stillborn (that is, born dead after 24 weeks of pregnancy), or who are born alive but then die, must by law be buried or cremated. For babies born dead before 24 weeks of pregnancy, the situation is different because there is no law that governs what happens to these babies.

After a late miscarriage, most hospitals offer a simple funeral and either burial or cremation. Some hospitals offer this for *all* babies, no matter how early the loss and whether or not there is a fully-formed body. However, in some hospitals practice is not so good and the remains of an early loss may be treated as clinical waste.

If you want to find out about the arrangements at your hospital, ask a nurse or midwife on the ward or unit where you were cared for, the hospital chaplain, the PALS (Patient Advice and Liaison) officer, or the hospital bereavement service.

A certificate for your baby

Although there is no legal certificate after a pregnancy loss before 24 weeks, many hospitals provide a certificate for parents which acknowledges what has happened. For many parents, this is an important memento.

If you have not been given a certificate but would like to have one, contact a nurse or midwife on the ward or unit where you were cared for, the hospital chaplain, the PALS (Patient Advice and Liaison) officer, or the hospital bereavement service.

Remembering

Many women who have grieved over the loss of a baby, no matter when or how the loss happened, say they never entirely forget.

It may help you to remember your baby by doing something for him or her. For example:

- plant a special flower or shrub, or bulbs, in the garden
- light a candle on anniversaries or other significant days
- buy something to remind you, such as a piece of jewellery, a teddy bear, a beautiful object
- make an entry for your baby in your hospital's book of remembrance (Ask about the book on the ward where you were cared for or speak to a hospital chaplain)
- make a box of mementos – for example, photos of you while you were pregnant, a scan photo if you have one, anything that you had bought or made for the baby and would like to keep . . .
- write a letter to your baby, or a poem for him or her.

All these things can be a way of expressing how you feel, marking what has happened, and recognising its importance.

Having decided that the way to remember my lost baby would be a small item of jewellery, I spent a long time considering what would be right. I eventually settled on a plain ring, in reality a simple wedding band, for my right hand. I wear it all the time and the simplicity of the ring, the symbolism of love having no beginning and no end, is very meaningful. At first when I wore the ring I was very aware of it. With time it has become a part of me, just as the baby was and is part of me.

I managed to get a picture of the seventh scan I'd had. To anybody who has never lost a baby it wouldn't mean anything, but to my husband and me, it's all we have of our baby. A couple of weeks after I miscarried we bought two plants from the garden centre and planted them in the garden with a pebble pond and a pear tree in memory of our little one.

Ceremonies

It may be important to you to hold some sort of ceremony.

If you didn't have a funeral for your baby or any kind of ceremony at the time, you may want to hold a memorial service. You could do this in your own place of worship, in another place that is special to you, at home or in your garden. It doesn't have to be a large affair: it could be small, maybe involving just you and your closest family and friends.

Your hospital may organise annual services of remembrance for all babies who have died. You can find out about this from the ward where you were cared for or from the hospital chaplain. Services like this are also organised by local groups of The Miscarriage Association and SANDS (Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Society), and sometimes organisations join together to put on a service. Contact The Miscarriage Association to find out more.

Sources of help and support

The following organisations offer support and/or counselling:

The Miscarriage Association

C/o Clayton Hospital, Northgate, Wakefield WF1 3JS

Tel: 01924 200799; www.miscarriageassociation.org.uk

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

1 Regent Place, Rugby CV21 2PJ

Tel: 0870 443 5252; www.counselling.co.uk

Relate

Herbert Gray College, Little Church Street, Rugby CV21 3AP

Tel: 0845 456 1310; www.relate.org.uk

BICA (British Infertility Counselling Association)

69 Division Street, Sheffield S1 4GE

Tel: 0114 263 1448; www.bica.net

The Samaritans

Tel: 08457 90 90 90 (24 hours a day); www.samaritans.org.uk

Useful reading

You may find some of the following publications helpful:

Miscarriage: Women's experiences and needs

by Christine Moulder

Published by Routledge, 1992, 2001

ISBN: 0 415 25489 2

When a baby dies: the experience of late miscarriage, stillbirth and neonatal death

by Nancy Kohner

Published by Routledge, 1991, 2001

ISBN: 0 415 25276 8

Our stories of miscarriage

edited by Rachel Faldet and Karen Fitton

Published by Fairview Press, 1997

ISBN: 1 57749 033 9

Leaflets published by The Miscarriage Association

- Men and Miscarriage
- Late miscarriage: the experience of second trimester loss
- Ectopic pregnancy
- Hydatidiform Mole
- Pregnancy loss and infertility
- Someone you know: *a leaflet for family and friends*
- Talking to children about pregnancy loss

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