

The Miscarriage Association



Acknowledging Pregnancy Loss

SOMEONE YOU KNOW...

When someone loses a baby through miscarriage or ectopic pregnancy, it can be one of the most devastating things that has ever happened to her and to her partner.

For you as a relative, friend or colleague, it can also be difficult, as you try your best to provide the support they both are needing.

This leaflet aims to help you recognise what to say and do in order to be a source of strength and comfort for the couple at a time when they may need you the most.

Although everyone's experience will be different and individual, the following thoughts are commonly expressed ones. You can be of help. This leaflet seeks to make it easier for you to do so in the face of a grief that is often difficult to comprehend.

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ACKNOWLEDGE THE BABY. However early the loss, to the couple it was their baby — their hopes and dreams; their future. Don't pretend that it never happened or underestimate the importance of the fact that their baby existed, if only for a short time, and the difference it made to their lives.

Consciously avoiding the subject can cause a strained atmosphere between you which can make a difficult time even worse. Acknowledge the sense of loss and grief the woman may be feeling by recognising she was a mother. It will help her feel her baby's life is not worth any less just because it was never born.

DON'T AVOID THE COUPLE. After the loss of a baby, the woman in particular can feel a great sense of isolation. She may feel an almost physical sense of emptiness where her baby has been. You may avoid visiting her for fear of upsetting her further, but your avoidance can increase this sense of isolation. Don't under-rate the sense of loss felt by her partner (if she has one). Although he may appear to be coping well, he may not be, and will appreciate being asked how he is. (It may be helpful to read The Miscarriage Association's leaflet *Men & Miscarriage*). Keep in contact; your continued presence can be a great comfort, not just in the few days after the loss, but during the weeks and months that follow.

DON'T REMAIN SILENT. Your initial meeting after the loss may be the hardest. It will be difficult to know what to say but remaining silent is often much worse. You will not need to say much; a simple 'I am sorry', with a hug if you feel it is appropriate, may be exactly what the woman and her partner need.

As time passes, asking 'How is it going now?' or 'How are you feeling?', can give the couple the chance either to brush it aside or to open up the floodgates. It does, however, show that you care and are still there for them if they want to talk.

LISTEN. This is the most important thing you can do to help. The couple are hurting — some women especially, may need to talk about their experience and feelings over and over again before they can even begin to heal. Talking will help them both come to terms with what has happened and the more you can be there to listen, the better. For you this may be an emotional and frustrating time, especially if you have never experienced miscarriage personally.

It is difficult to see someone you care for upset and in tears, but don't be tempted to say things such as 'Pull yourself together' or 'Surely you should be over it by now'. It can sometimes take months or even years to come to terms with; some people never do. The loss never truly goes away — the couple just learn to deal with it in time. By listening, you can be part of that process.

THE EMOTIONAL ROLLERCOASTER Couples experience many and varied emotions following the loss of a baby through miscarriage or ectopic pregnancy, particularly if it is not their first loss. Guilt, blame, anger and a sense of failure are part of the process of the bereavement which they are going through. A woman's feelings can be very different to those of her partner who is likely to feel that he needs to be the strong one. This can make it difficult for the couple to share their grief even with each other.

Sometimes it will feel as if your friend is walking an emotional tightrope and the slightest reminder can trigger the tears. It can seem that everyone else around them is either pregnant or has a baby and this can increase feelings of loneliness and frustration.

TIME TO GRIEVE A commonly heard cliché is that time is a great healer. The raw emotions of early pregnancy loss do not last, but neither do they disappear completely, they just change. Time enables the feelings to alter into a sense of sadness and regret, but also one of acceptance for what has happened. The experience gradually becomes less overwhelming and couples can look forward instead of back. You can help by recognising that couples need time to grieve for their loss. Be there for them throughout this process; your care and support will be appreciated.

There is no time limit for grieving. It may appear that your friend seems quite in control of his/her life and is back to normal, but do not assume all is well. It is easy to say 'Yes, I am fine' when inside there is a voice screaming 'No, I am not'. You may need to ask again.

It is very common for couples to relive their grief in the months to come. Especially bad times are the date their baby was due and the anniversary of the miscarriage. They may need your support during these times and may find it comforting to know that you also have remembered their loss.

THE NEXT PREGNANCY Some couples experience a real fear of miscarrying again in any future pregnancy. The greatest anxieties come just prior to or at the time when they experienced their loss. If the loss has been as a result of ectopic pregnancy, then there is a great fear of a further ectopic. Don't feel tempted to say something such as 'I am sure you will be OK this time', as this can add extra pressure.

Some women may wish to become pregnant again straight away; others may take longer before they have the courage to try again. Men too can have mixed feelings, which might differ from those of their partner. Being pregnant is not necessarily a wish to replace the baby they have lost and does not lessen their feelings of grieving.

WHAT NOT TO SAY... The following are commonly said and can cause many couples much heartache and pain:

'It's nature's way of getting rid of something which was deformed.'

'Don't worry, you are only young — you can always have another one.'

'It was probably for the best.'

'At least you have got one already...'

'At least it was only eight weeks. I know someone who had a stillbirth...'

If the couple already have a child, it is easy to underestimate the effect of miscarriage, but the loss can be equally devastating and their child or children may suffer too, having expected a brother or sister. It is also hurtful to have the loss compared with a 'worse' loss. Try not to give examples of someone else. Early miscarriage, ectopic pregnancy, stillbirth or cot death; all are very different but each is a bereavement.

WHAT TO SAY... The most useful are often the simplest:

'I'm so very sorry you have lost your baby.'

'This must be dreadful for you both...'

'I don't know what to say to you...'

'I can't imagine how you must be feeling'

Show how upset you feel — a stiff upper lip is not always appropriate. Flowers can often say what is needed and a card should include both partners' names. Let them know you will be there for them to talk to; don't be embarrassed to share their grief.

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT. The Miscarriage Association provides a network of volunteer telephone contacts who have had personal experience of miscarriage or ectopic pregnancy. It may be easier for your friend to speak to someone whom they don't know rather than to a close friend or relative. You may find it useful too. Please contact the Association's Head Office for the name of a contact or support group in your area or for an information pack on pregnancy loss.

Peta Harrison – 1998, revised 2002.