



MISCARRIAGE
ASSOCIATION

The knowledge to help

Looking after your mental health during and after pregnancy loss

We all need to look after our mental health. But experiencing pregnancy loss may mean you need to take even greater care of yourself for a while.

You may have experienced a loss recently. Or perhaps your loss or losses were a while ago but you feel as bad as ever, or worse.

You may have experienced the physical loss yourself, or you may be the partner of someone who has.

Whatever your situation, if you need some more support with your mental health, this leaflet is for you.

Feelings

How you feel after your loss will depend on your circumstances, your experience of loss and what the pregnancy meant to you.

You might feel any of these.

- Sad and tearful
- Shocked and confused
- Numb
- Angry
- Jealous
- Guilty
- Empty
- Lonely
- Panicky
- Acceptance

All of the feelings listed here are understandable reactions – and they may affect your day-to-day mental wellbeing for a while. We hope this leaflet helps you look after yourself and think about when to look for extra support.

“It’s hard to know if it’s normal grief or worse due to previous struggles with depression.”

Pregnancy loss and mental health problems

For some people, pregnancy loss may be part of what causes a mental health problem – or makes one worse. You might be given a diagnosis (like post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety or depression)¹ or experience symptoms that make life difficult for a long time.

“When there was no joy in my life months after my loss, when I started to believe the world was better off without me, I knew that was more than grieving.”

¹ See reference 2, page 14

If you are looking at this leaflet because you are feeling suicidal right now, please consider one of these courses of action:

- Go to your local A&E department or call 999.
- Contact the Samaritans anytime on freephone 116 123.
- Contact your GP for an emergency appointment or to speak to the out of hours team.
- Look at Mind's 'I need urgent help' tool – find it in the footnotes below.²

How could pregnancy loss contribute to mental health problems?

Sometimes the trauma of your loss may cause intrusive thoughts, flashbacks or nightmares.³

Sometimes it's what happens afterwards that contributes to mental health problems. We've listed some examples below. Lots of people experience a combination of these things.

Thinking lots of negative thoughts about yourself

Negative thoughts about yourself can lead to low self-esteem. Having low self-esteem can be linked to mental health problems. It can also make it harder to ask for help. Below are some of the negative thoughts that people told us they experienced.

- I 'should' be coping better.
- I 'should' be stronger or be able to offer more support to my partner.
- It was my fault.
- There's something wrong with me.
- I have let people down.

Thinking and worrying a lot

Worrying a lot is exhausting. It can create negative thought patterns and change how you behave. It may also make it harder to focus on things that could help you feel better.

For example, you might be:

- wondering whether you could have prevented the loss
- pregnant again, reading all online advice about avoiding miscarriage
- worrying about conceiving or whether you will ever have children
- feeling as if you don't have as much control over your life as you would like.

I have always struggled with low self esteem. The losses really exacerbated this as I felt it was all my fault. I felt useless as a woman.

² www.mind.org.uk/need-urgent-help/using-this-tool/

³ See reference 2, page 14

Feeling lonely and isolated

Loneliness and isolation can have a negative impact on your mental health.

Pregnancy loss can make you feel alone in different ways.

Feeling physically isolated. You may feel unable to go out or see friends or family because it's too difficult to see pregnant women or children. This might mean you miss out on valuable sources of comfort and support.

Feeling as if no-one understands you. You might have lots of people around you but none of them seem to understand how you feel or care for you in the way you would like. It may feel particularly difficult if you don't think your partner understands you.

Having an existing mental health problem

If you live with a mental health problem already, you may find that pregnancy loss adds extra strain and makes it harder to cope.

Turning back to coping behaviours you have used in the past

If you have used coping behaviours like food (restricting or eating more), exercise, self-harm, alcohol or drugs in the past, you may turn back to these after your loss. Although they may help in the short term, relying on them may mean you don't seek long-term support.

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The losses have made my anxiety (which was mild before), more difficult to deal with.

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Specific diagnoses

Although more research is needed, pregnancy loss has been linked to some specific mental health problems. (See research references on page 14.)

Depression

Depression is a feeling of low mood that lasts for a long time and affects your everyday life. It can make you feel hopeless, despairing, guilty, worthless, unmotivated and exhausted. It can affect your self-esteem, sleep, appetite, sex drive and your physical health.⁴

Anxiety

Anxiety is what we feel when we are worried, tense or afraid. Occasional anxiety is a normal human experience. But if your feelings of anxiety are very strong, or last for a long time, they can be overwhelming.⁵

A lot of women tell us that they feel very anxious during a pregnancy after a previous loss. You may find it helpful to have a look at our leaflet about pregnancy after loss (see page 14).

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

PTSD is a type of anxiety disorder that you may develop after being involved in a traumatic event like pregnancy loss. You might have flashbacks or nightmares about what happened.

You can read more about PTSD on Mind's website. Their information is useful – although they don't have specific information on PTSD after pregnancy loss at the moment.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

OCD is a type of mental health condition.

It has two main parts: obsessions (unwelcome thoughts, images, urges, worries or doubts that repeatedly appear in your mind); and compulsions (repetitive activities that you feel you have to do to reduce the anxiety caused by the obsession).⁶

You can find out more about OCD on Mind's website. They talk about symptoms, causes, getting a diagnosis and treatment, along with advice for family and friends.

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I already had a diagnosis of depression. Our loss severely exacerbated feelings of numbness and isolation.

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^{4, 5 and 6} More information on depression, anxiety and OCD and other types of mental health conditions is available at mind.org.uk

Symptoms and difficult experiences

Not everyone is diagnosed with a specific mental health problem. But you might still have symptoms that are upsetting and difficult to live with. If you experience any of these, you may want to look for some extra support.

- Flashbacks – feeling as if you are re-experiencing your loss, as if it is happening now.
- Panic attacks – you may feel sweaty, sick, disconnected, shaky and out of control.
- Self-harm – hurting yourself to help deal with overwhelming emotions and painful thoughts.
- Suicidal feelings – thinking the world would be better off without you, having more thoughts about death, or making a plan to end your life.
- Insomnia or problems with sleep – finding yourself unable to sleep because you are worrying and thinking a lot about your loss, or for another reason.
- Nightmares – having nightmares related to your loss when you do sleep.
- Feeling tired all the time – even if you have managed to get enough sleep.
- Intrusive thoughts – not being able to control when images or thoughts related to your loss appear in your mind.
- Difficulty concentrating or remembering things.
- Phobias - feeling very scared or anxious about something specific, perhaps related to your loss (but not always).

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I have constant terror of periods (blood in vagina area) and of doctors.

”

You can read more about these symptoms and experiences at [mind.org.uk](https://www.mind.org.uk).

Care and support

We all need to look after our mental health. Not all of these suggestions will be right for everyone, but we hope some of them will feel right for you.

Looking after your wellbeing

Looking after your wellbeing can help you feel more resilient.

Some people we spoke to found mindfulness, yoga, acupuncture or gentle exercise helped them feel calmer and more able to cope. You can read more about these on the NHS website.⁷ Others said that making a plan for the future and keeping busy was useful.

You don't need to have reached crisis point to seek additional support. You might find that talking to a counsellor helps you stay well.

Improving your self esteem

We asked women and their partners what helped them improve their self-esteem after their loss or losses. These are some of their suggestions.

- Read other people's stories.
- Give yourself time to grieve. Let your body and mind adjust.
- Start a new skill or hobby – after feeling so much that my body had let me down I had to remind myself of what it **COULD** do right. Joining a female voice choir and the therapy of music was hugely instrumental in helping in dark times.
- Challenge yourself – I ran the London Marathon in April and used it to raise funds for the Miscarriage Association. This made me realise my body is actually strong and it can do amazing things. It's too easy to blame yourself.
- Get your feelings out in the open by talking or writing things down in letters, a journal or on the Miscarriage Association's website.
- Be kind to yourself.

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Eating well, sleeping well and regular exercise have been key to building resilience and physical and mental strength after my loss.

”

⁷ <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/>

Coping with Loneliness

Lots of people told us they felt lonely and isolated after their loss or losses. Here are some of the things that helped them cope.

- I felt less alone by sharing my story online. It helped me tell everyone, without having to say the words out loud.
- I don't feel comfortable with friends with new babies. I used to hide away [but] now I just openly say it upsets me and people understand.
- Raising awareness really helped me. Getting people involved in the video I did for Baby Loss Awareness Week made me feel less alone and helped turn a negative into a positive
- I talked about it anonymously on the phone to someone from the Miscarriage Association. I could say things out loud without feeling judged or worrying about hurting other people's feelings.
- Literally spell out exactly how you're feeling to your partner, don't assume they will just know or expect that they should.
- I started a blog after my loss so I could express how I felt and it gave me a lot of comfort knowing if someone was reading. It felt like someone was listening to me.
- Being open with people helped. It's amazing how many people, both family and friends, shared their own stories with me. Whilst it didn't take away all of the emotional pain it did make me feel less alone and like there was hope for the future.

A counsellor or therapist could help you think about useful strategies – for example to help you cope with seeing babies and children. We have more information about counselling on our website:

<https://www.miscarriageassociation.org.uk/your-feelings/counselling-after-a-miscarriage/>

You might also find it helpful to have a look at our information on other people's reactions. See www.miscarriageassociation.org.uk/your-feelings/other-peoples-reactions/.

Online support

You can go online to find information, seek support, express yourself, share experiences and connect with others.

Options for online support

- Reading blogs and personal stories
- Setting up your own blog or sharing your story
- Using hashtags to find communities on Instagram
- Joining one of the Miscarriage Association's Facebook groups
- Posting on communities that you're already part of which are likely to be supportive
- Looking for information
- Using apps like Headspace to help with mindfulness, or Couch to 5k to help with exercising

Looking after your mental health online

Sometimes being online can make your mental health worse.

You might compare yourself and your experience to others – and this could make you feel worse. Or it might be that reading about other people's experiences reminds you of your own and brings those emotions back.

Sometimes other people's comments can be upsetting – or just not feel helpful for you right now.

Lots of people find that being online late at night can sometimes make it harder to sleep. This might be because of the blue light given off by your device, or because your mind is more active after spending time online.

If you find yourself feeling worse after going online, think about taking a break. You could leave that community for a while or delete, unfollow or hide certain people. Mind has some more information about looking after your mental health online.⁸

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Instagram has been my saviour. I set up a private account and connected with others who have been through the same and we all chat and support each other.

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⁸ www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/online-mental-health/#.XG0qYpP7S3d

Getting professional support for your mental health

When do you need extra help?

It can be hard to admit you need extra support. It can feel quite daunting. You may find things difficult to talk about and hope your feelings will change on their own. They might do. But seeking help early can sometimes prevent your mental health from getting worse.

Talking to your GP

Your GP can make a diagnosis, prescribe medication, tell you more about local support and refer you to counselling or additional support on the NHS.

Ask for a GP you feel comfortable with. It can help to write things down beforehand so you know what you want to say. You can even give these notes to the GP in the appointment. Mind has some useful tips on talking to your GP about your mental health.⁸

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Feelings of isolation and anxiety made it difficult to reach out for help and support when I really needed it.

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“

After the miscarriage, I went to my GP and I was put on antidepressants for a while and referred to the counselling service at the GP surgery.

”

⁸www.mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/seeking-help-for-a-mental-health-problem/talking-to-your-gp/#.XG0qgZP7S3d

Medication

You may be offered psychiatric medication. Depending on your situation, you could be offered antidepressants, antipsychotics, sleeping pills or mood stabilisers.

The decision to take medication isn't always a simple one.

If you were taking medication when you were trying to conceive and/or while pregnant, you may worry that this caused your loss. This is highly unlikely. Most losses occur because of a problem with the egg or sperm cell rather than anything you have done or taken.

You may be thinking of trying again and worry about being on medication while trying to conceive. Or you may be pregnant after your loss and worry about taking medication during your pregnancy.

Although any risks are usually very low, many doctors will err on the side of caution and recommend that you don't take medication during pregnancy. However, this is not the best approach for everyone.

Ask your doctor to help you make a decision. They should explain the risks of both taking and not taking medication, the safest medications for you and other possible treatment options.

Doctors often have different approaches and experience. Consider getting a second opinion so you can be sure you have been given balanced advice.

You could also ask other women about their experiences of taking medication. Local groups or online communities might help you find a range of experiences.

Counselling

It can be really difficult to find your way through the experience of pregnancy loss on your own. A professional counsellor could offer you extra support.

You may be able to access counselling through your GP, through a self-referral programme, through a charity or through your place of work or study. Have a look at the information about counselling on our website.

“After my third miscarriage I was referred to the Women’s Health Counsellor in our area. She is the first person who made me feel empowered and hopeful.”

Finding your way through

Finding your way through the experience of pregnancy loss and recovering from a mental health problem can be a long journey.

You may find you never go back to how your life was before. Instead you'll find a new normal. This might include learning more about your strengths and your vulnerabilities and building a 'toolkit' of coping mechanisms.

It may not be a straightforward process but being kind to yourself, talking to people you trust and finding the right help can make a big difference. If you are finding it difficult to move forwards, the Miscarriage Association can help you think through your next steps.

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Take one day at a time. It's okay to have these feelings of grief, anger, resentment, sadness and so much more. They won't always feel this strong. You will find joy again.

”

Useful contacts and resources

Anxiety UK

anxietyuk.org.uk

03444 775 774

Support and help for anyone with anxiety.

Beat Eating Disorders

beateatingdisorders.org.uk

Adult helpline: 0808 801 0677

Youthline: 0808 801 0711

Supporting people affected by eating disorders.

British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy

bacp.co.uk

01455 883 300

Information and details of accredited practitioners.

Cruse Bereavement Care

cruse.org.uk

0808 808 1677

helpline@cruse.org.uk

Advice to anyone who has been affected by a death.

Mind

Mind.org.uk

Infoline - open 9am to 6pm, Monday to Friday (except for bank holidays).

0300 123 3393

info@mind.org.uk

Live chat through Mind's website

Mind also has mental health information on its site. Local Mind branches may also offer support and counselling.

No Panic

0300 772 9844 (10am–10pm)

nopanic.org.uk

Provides a helpline, step-by-step programmes, and support for those with anxiety.

OCD Action

0300 636 5478

ocdaction.org.uk

Information and support for people with experience of OCD, and their friends, family and carers.

PTSD UK

ptsduk.org

Information and support for people with PTSD.

Petals

petalscharity.org

Supporting parents through pregnancy and baby loss with free specialist counselling.

Relate

relate.org.uk

Relationship support and on and offline counselling.

Samaritans

samaritans.org

24-hour helpline: 116 123 (freephone)

jo@samaritans.org

Emotional support for anyone feeling down, experiencing distress or struggling to cope.

Student Minds

studentminds.org.uk

Mental health support for students.

Welldoing.org

welldoing.org

Information and details of accredited therapists. Includes a tool to match you with an appropriate therapist.

Leaflets published by the Miscarriage Association:

- Why me?
- Thinking about another pregnancy
- Pregnancy after loss
- Recurrent miscarriage
- Your feelings after miscarriage
- Partners too

See our full list of leaflets here:

www.miscarriageassociation.org.uk/information/leaflets/

References

1. Farren J, Jalmbrant M, Ameye L, et al. Post-traumatic stress, anxiety and depression following miscarriage or ectopic pregnancy: a prospective cohort study. *BMJ Open* <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/6/11/e011864>
2. Farren J, Jalmbrant M, Falconieri N, et al. Posttraumatic stress, anxiety and depression following miscarriage and ectopic pregnancy: a multicenter, prospective, cohort study. *Am J Obstet Gynecol* 2020;222:367.e1-22. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajog.2019.10.102>
3. Farren J, Jalmbrant M, Falconieri N, et al. Differences in post-traumatic stress, anxiety and depression following miscarriage or ectopic pregnancy between women and their partners: multicenter prospective cohort study. *Ultrasound Obstet Gynecol.* 2021 Jan;57(1):141-148. <https://doi.org/10.1002/uog.23147>

Need to talk to someone who understands?

Call on 0303 003 6464.

Email us at info@miscarriageassociation.org.uk

Start a live chat via our website: miscarriageassociation.org.uk

Monday, Tuesday and Thursday: 9am - 4pm.

Wednesday and Friday: 9am - 8pm.





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