

## How Do You Grieve a Reproductive Loss?

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[www.ReproductivePsych.org](http://www.ReproductivePsych.org)

[www.UnsungLullabies.com](http://www.UnsungLullabies.com)

Without doubt, the loss of a baby is one of the most painful of human experiences. It doesn't matter whether your baby died after birth, whether you terminated a pregnancy because of a genetic anomaly, whether you have had a miscarriage, or whether you are struggling with infertility; what you have lost is your hopes and dreams of your family to be.

The death of a loved one is painful indeed, but it is expected that your grandparents will predecease your parents, and they in turn will predecease you. This is the way it is supposed to be. Regardless of your personal beliefs, every religion and culture has established rituals to support us when we lose someone dear to us. But with a reproductive loss, when death comes at the time life is just beginning, the rules are out of order and you may find yourself feeling lost and helpless as you struggle to make sense out of your experience. A reproductive loss is as distressing as losing a loved one and more, because it is a loss not of the past, but of the future.

There are few if any rituals to guide you through this grief, and the normal channels of support – your friends and family – may not know what to do or say to comfort you. In fact, they may inadvertently say things that actually hurt. Remarks like, *you're young, you can have another, or it was for the best* are well intentioned, but leave you feeling misunderstood and alone.

Comments such as these may even make you feel as if your grief is illegitimate. This often happens when there is no actual body to grieve over, as in a miscarriage, an ectopic pregnancy or with infertility. 'Disenfranchised grief' (Doka, 2002) refers to a loss that is not publicly acknowledged. You may feel that your loss is minimized by society at large because it is not fully recognized by others. Sometimes the only people who know that a loss has occurred are you and your partner, as in an early miscarriage for example. From the outside, you look the same, even though you are going through one of the most devastating times of your life. And when others don't understand the depth of your loss – or how long it takes to grieve – you may feel terribly isolated and set apart from our family-focused society.

It's also important to note that men and women often express their grief in different ways. When it seems that your partner does not understand, you may again feel disenfranchised in your grief. In general, women show their feelings about the loss more openly: they cry more, get depressed, need to talk about it, and avoid exposing themselves to situations where babies are present. Men, on the other hand, appear to be less emotive. They are often called upon and

expected to take care of their partner: they make the necessary funeral arrangements and contact family and friends. When an IVF fails, for instance, they may act as a supportive coach and hold onto hope for future success.

But this does not mean that men feel the loss less intensely; they just express it differently. They may get angry, abuse alcohol, or throw themselves into work with more fervor. Many men avoid talking about their feelings with their partner because they don't want to sadden her. They fear that if they bring up the subject, it will make matters worse, but what really happens is that she gets upset because he is *not* talking about it. She may think he is insensitive and uncaring when it is his intense concern about her that inhibits the 'normal' and expected expression of grief.

What's important to remember is that this is a traumatic event in both of your lives. So how do you get through it?

- Be sensitive to each other. Find time to talk about your feelings together, but also, be respectful of your partner's need to *not* talk.
- Create your own rituals. Finding a meaningful way to express your grief – either alone or with your partner – can be very helpful. Some people plant a commemorative garden, light candles, or keep a journal.
- Give yourself permission to avoid baby or family related events. If the situation permits, you can explain why you cannot attend a baby shower or birthday party. It is also okay to just say that you have another commitment.
- Cry when you need to but also allow yourself time to appreciate what you do have and enjoy yourself.
- Exercise can help as well as focusing on new pursuits. If you have wanted to take a course – be it learning a language or how to throw a pot – let yourself follow your desire. It may feel forced to do so, but engaging in new activities can remind you that you are more than your reproductive organs, and that life must go on.
- Know that you are not alone. Support groups can be extremely helpful (see our list of resources for some helpful websites).
- Don't be afraid to seek out the guidance of a therapist. Some people are resistant to this idea – it may feel as if there is yet another thing wrong with you – but talking with a neutral person who is familiar with reproductive technology and the emotional roller coaster of these losses can help the grieving process.
- Finally, remember that you will get through this. There are many ways to build a family. Remaining a family of two is also a viable solution. Although you can't erase this pain, you can learn from it and your sensitivity will no doubt be helpful to others.