



SHADY GROVE FERTILITY

REPRODUCTIVE SCIENCE CENTER

The Magnitude of Miscarriage

By Sharon N. Covington, LCSW-C
Director, Psychological Support Services

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you.

--Jeremiah 1:5

Pregnancy begins psychologically, long before it does physically. From an early age, children have imaginative play about having babies and being parents. Teenagers fantasize of love, marriage, and family. Young couples talk, plan, and dream about birth and how many children they will have.

If you are trying to conceive, it can seem like you already know this child well – the wished-for baby in many become pregnant, bonding increases. This is facilitated by information learned from new medical technology, which just a few years ago would not have been known until after birth. Today, blood tests can let a woman know she is pregnant before she misses her period. Sonograms provide a window into the uterus and a picture of your baby before any physical changes have occurred to make others aware of your pregnancy. Amniocentesis and chorionic villi sampling can let you know the sex of your baby and genetic make-up before you are even wearing maternity clothes. Because of these factors, the fetus is seen as a baby/person much earlier and bonding occurs much sooner than in years past.

The magnitude of miscarriage – to lose a baby within the first few months of conception – can be great. For you to experience the elation of learning you are pregnant, only to feel the despair of discovering you have miscarried, is a multifaceted loss. It is the loss of a baby, a part of yourself, your health, control, innocence, potential, relationships with others, possibly your reproductive capacity, and on and on.

The same kinds of feelings can be experienced after an unsuccessful IVF or GIFT cycle. You may view each fertilized egg, whether transferred or not, as a baby. When a cycle fails to achieve a confirmed pregnancy it can feel like a miscarriage.

"In our society, we measure grief by the size of the coffin."

-- Sherokee Ilse, *Empty Arms*

It is often difficult for people to understand what a profound loss a miscarriage can be for a couple. And yet the grief can be like a tidal wave that sweeps over you when you lose your baby, no matter how far along you were. Feelings such as disbelief, anger, rage, blame, guilt, sadness, and depression may engulf you, growing and cresting with time. The feelings can recur and are highly individual, based upon your own personality and life experiences. Grieving is a uniquely personal experience.

The size and depth of the tidal wave will depend on a number of factors, primarily concerning your psychological investment in this pregnancy. For example, often the longer one has been trying to conceive, the greater the sense of loss that results from miscarrying. The wave of grief seems to crest somewhere between three to nine months after your loss.

When the crest has passed and the water seems to have calmed, there can still be swells. These are rekindled feelings and are often triggered by reminders of your baby – your due date, holidays, or times of the year. Each person has his or her own triggers which are related to real memories and what you wished or imagined about your baby.

"A person is a person no matter how small ..."
-- Dr. Seuss, *Horton Hatches the Egg*

Grieving is the way to heal emotionally from the loss of your baby. Here are some positive steps that can help you in the healing process:

- ◆ Recognize that your miscarriage is a significant and real loss. It is the death of a baby, with all the hopes and dreams. Find ways to acknowledge your baby's existence: have a memorial or religious service; give a donation or gift to a special charity; plant a tree or flowers; put together a memory box; engrave a charm to wear; or give your baby a name.
- ◆ Understand that you and your partner will feel and deal differently with the loss. Be patient and understanding of each other's feelings, realizing that different doesn't mean better or worse. You will each need time to integrate this loss into your life. Keep communication open.
- ◆ Let people know how you feel and what they can do to help you. You may find that one of the most difficult tasks after a miscarriage is facing the people who knew you were pregnant. Sometimes they may say things that are hurtful, however well intended. Often people want to help but don't know how.
- ◆ Prepare ahead for such "reminder" days as your due date, holidays, and the anniversary of your miscarriage. Make some gesture of commemoration, such as lighting a candle, attending a religious service, or making a memorial donation. Have a special dinner or send flowers in your baby's memory to someone who has been especially supportive.
- ◆ Seek support from others who have had similar experiences, through support groups and friends, or by reading books on the subject. The organization, Miscarriage, Infant Death, and Stillbirth (MIS), offers support groups, information, and resources in metropolitan Washington, D.C. (Call 301-460-6222 for a recorded message on contact people and meeting locations.) Professional counseling may help you get through a difficult period.
- ◆ Find creative ways to express your feelings. Use art as a medium to channel emotions,

such as writing a letter or journal to your baby, drawing, composing music, or sculpting. This beautiful poem sums up the magnitude of miscarriage:

A Pray for Baby

Never to have known you, but to have loved you.
Never to have held you, the way mothers do.

With you I bury my hopes and dreams
For an unknown child I'd never seen.

But also I bury the love in my heart
And the sadness of knowing that we must part.

And I pray to God to do for you
All the things that I would like to do.

And to keep my baby safe from harm
To laugh and frolic in springtime's arms.

Suggested Reading:

Miscarriage: Women Sharing from the Heart. By Mary Allen and Shelly Marks. New York: John Wiley and Co., 1993

Internet Resources:

WWW.NATIONALSHAREOFFICE.COM

WWW.RESOLVE.ORG

WWW.INCID.ORG

For more information on SGFC Psychological Support Services contact Sharon Covington at 301-279-9030.