

Navigating the Waves of Loss as a Couple

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What I would like to share with you today

- 💧 The impact of babyloss in Couple Relationship
- 💧 What we know about babyloss & the couple relationship
- 💧 What you can do to navigate a way through the waves with shared understanding, compassion, love and HOPE

My Story





Myths?

- 💧 One of the most common held myths is that after the death of a child, the majority of marriages end in divorce
- 💧 Is this true or false

Myths?

- One of the most common held myths is that after the death of a child, the majority of marriages end in divorce
- Lehman's 1987 study indicated that the divorce rates among bereaved parents are as much as eight times the norm (Rogers 2008)
- In reality the death of a child usually acts to polarize the existing factors found in the marriage/partnership;
- Some get worse, some get better, some just maintain, and some actually do end in divorce
- But the relationship will never be the same again as it was before the child's death
- They have lost the same child, but the loss for each partner is unique
- Marriage is not necessarily an all-purpose relationship. No one person can meet all the needs all the time of their spouse/partner

The couple and babyloss

- As married or cohabiting spouses, parents must address the impact of the death as individuals as well as addressing changes to their relationship as a couple (Rando 2000).
- Furthermore, because the death of a child defies the expected order of life events, many parents experience the event as a challenge to basic existential assumptions – why am I here ?Why is this happening to me?(Rogers 2008)
- Parents might also experience guilt about having been unable to protect their baby
- Involvement in one's own grief may diminish empathy for the other
- Societal and cultural expectations of bereaved parents may result in disenfranchised grief (Burden & Bradley 2016)



Marriage and cohabitation outcomes after pregnancy loss (Gold 2010)

- 💧 This was the first national study in US to establish that parental relationships have a higher risk of dissolving after miscarriage or stillbirth, compared with live births

Results

- 💧 7770 eligible pregnancies
- 💧 82% ended in live births
- 💧 16% in miscarriages
- 💧 2% in stillbirths

- 💧 22% of couples who had miscarried were more likely to separate
- 💧 40% of couples who had a stillbirth were more likely to separate

Gold 2010 cont.

- Most of this effect after miscarriages occurred between 1.5 and 3 years after the loss.
- In contrast, the effect for stillbirths persisted for up to 9 years after the loss

The statistically significant risk factors for relationship dissolution included

- Lower maternal age
- Cohabitation v marriage
- Previous live birth
- Black race
- Shorter duration of relationship

Gold 2010 Results cont

- 💧 Couples with an unstable relationship before the pregnancy and those with other risk factors for breaking up may find themselves unable to sustain their relationship after a miscarriage or stillbirth
- 💧 Couples with significantly different grieving patterns may be at particularly high risk for subsequent marital conflict or emotional withdrawal
- 💧 Cohabiting couples are at higher risk of separation in general and, in our study, cohabiting parents accounted for more than one-half of the relationship separations after fetal loss

Other Studies

- 💧 **37% of women** (19 of 52 women) with previous losses reported breakdown of a partnership found at follow-up times of 6 to 8 years, compared with just **12%** of control mothers (6 of 51 women) UK study (Turton 2009)
- 💧 Poor mental health at the time of the survey, around nine months after their baby's death, was significant with about **a third of women and a fifth of men** suffering from anxiety and/or depression (Redshaw, Rowe Henderson 2014)
- 💧 An evaluation of parents surveyed nearly 20 years after their child's death found **30%** rate of marital disruption for bereaved parents compared with **24%** for non-control subjects (Rogers 2008)

Separate roads of grief

This is normal but may become a barrier to communication and both may have feelings of vulnerability

- Women typically grieve more intensely and for longer periods of time
- Intuitive grieving – crying, sadness
- More likely to move into depression
- Talking about their loss much more
- Take comfort from rituals and memorabilia
- More emotional expression as they process discuss to cope with the stress
- Women value open communication significantly more than men (Serrano & Lima 2006)
- Women, more frequently than men reported guilt and disturbing images, thoughts and feelings that interfered with sex



Separate Roads of Grief Cont.

- Grief reactions take place at different times than the mother's,
- Both will experience recurring grief at varying times
- Men displayed more instrumental grief - frustration, anger, withdrawal, keeping busy with work or other tasks
- Fathers are less likely to articulate their grief than their wives, and more inclined to find intimacy through sex,
- Men try to control their emotions and cope with them alone, engaging in solution-focused discussions and activities
- Blow to these hopes and dreams, or even to his ego
- Could feel ignored, lonely, abandoned, isolated or overwhelmed,
- infidelity and, at times, physical violence.
- Overall, husbands experienced less guilt, meaninglessness, yearning, and morbid fear than wives (Lang 2007)



Contradictions in managing grief

- Contradiction between trying to grieve their child's death together as a couple and apart as individuals.
- Contradiction between being both open and closed when talking with one another about their child's death.
- How they negotiate these contradictions lies in their emotional strength and attunement as a couple

(Toller & Braithwaite 2009)

The Good News



- 💧 Most couples weather the strain, eventually reporting increased closeness and a deeper marital bond, with no evidence of significantly increased risk of long-term marital disruption. (Leon 2008, Heazell 2016)
- 💧 As long as they (Fathers) remain emotionally available and attentive to their wives' overt suffering, the marital bond is not threatened and is often strengthened. (Leon 2008)
- 💧 Some parents reported a changed approach to their life, self-esteem and identity (Heazell 2016)
- 💧 Couples stated that they became closer after the loss and now had a 'special unifying bond'
- 💧 Less intense grief reactions for fathers with a more intimate marital relationship

Fathers and their babyloss

“She can go to online support groups. What can I do? Just hold it in and do nothing.... We just can't break down and start balling at the supper table. It's just not being a man..” (O'Leary 2016)

Fathers are often neglected grievers....their role perceived as a support for the mother putting their feelings on the back burner to concentrate on their partners

Pregnancy offers a window of opportunity for recognizing and addressing men's attachment issues and mental health as well as problems in the couple's relationship (O'Leary 2016)

“For five months I had dreamed of what it would be like to be Lara Jean's dad.” (Andrew Don 2005)



Prenatal Attachment



With advances in imaging technology, both parents of stillborn children often have experienced the infant kicking and have heard fetal heart sounds, which potentially makes the infant and the anticipated birth more tangible to both parents for a much longer time (Gold 2010)

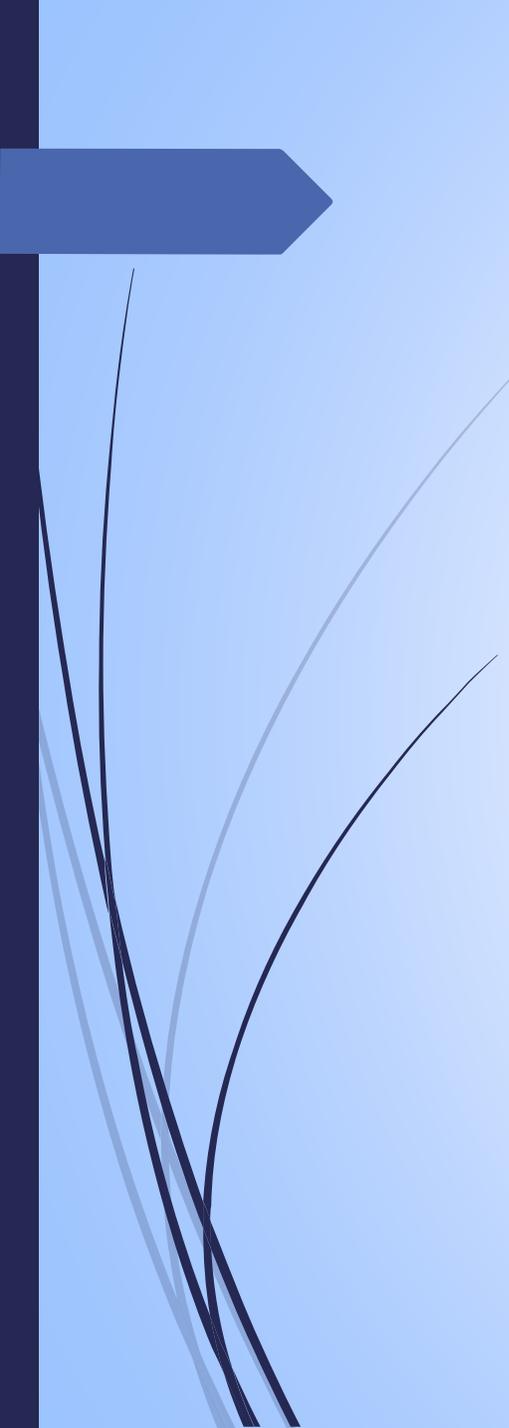
Emerging research suggests that there is a deep connection developing between the mother and the unborn child and that fetal cells can enter the maternal circulation and some mothers still feel the presence of their baby, intensifying grief (O'Leary & Warland 2016)

This would be good knowledge for fathers to understand this intense grief

The trauma of the previous loss, longing for the deceased baby, and the fear that an unborn baby that follows a loss might also die can therefore interfere with parents' ability to risk attaching to a new pregnancy

Later pregnancy loss and stillbirth allow for greater period of attachment to baby and may cause more psychological trauma and a longer duration of psychological stress (Leon 2009)





"initially, my husband 'shielded' me from everything. After a very short time, he began refusing to acknowledge baby had existed and this put a great strain on us both. We eventually divorced"

"I was an open, throbbing wound, and he wanted to have sex. It was very hard for me to understand that he was also in pain and that he felt our closeness would be healing." (DeFrain 1982)

Sexual Intimacy

- Lower levels of intimacy and support from one's partner are associated with greater incidence, intensity, and duration of grief symptoms for both men and women (Swarbe 1992, Ogwulu et al 2015)
- Grief was related to the quality of communication in the couple for women, and to the quality of sex life for men. (Serrano & Lima 2006)
- Many parents have only a few sexually related problems following babyloss, but a fairly large minority especially women experience major problems (Dyregrov 2011) (175 couples)
- Men ready to resume sex much earlier
- Women more often troubled by unwanted thoughts intruding on the sexual act
- Women more often perceive sex as somehow wrong
- Men can more easily misinterpret closeness as a wish for sex



Resilience

- 💧 We are born with the tools to be resilient (Bonnano 2012)
- 💧 How has the person handled traumatic experiences in the past?
- 💧 Have there been other grief experiences in the person's life?
- 💧 Age, gender, cultural background, spirituality, support system, and family history influence resilience
- 💧 If you live in poverty or lack access to adequate education, you are less likely to be resilient
- 💧 Different grieving style and timing for dealing with grief, known as incongruent grieving
- 💧 Most people rebound from loss fairly quickly
- 💧 Ability to put pain aside when it is necessary to and manage daily life
- 💧 Ability to ask for help
- 💧 Ability to reframe cognitively and gradually move forward

What can help

Men

- 💧 try to accept a woman's need for outside support
- 💧 listen without judgment or criticism
- 💧 recognize that her process is often longer and more intense than a man's



Women

- 💧 might practice validating a man's emotions
- 💧 allowing him to experience periods of silence or withdrawal
- 💧 finding ways to lessen his role as "protector" by seeking other means of support

Working together as a Couple

- 💧 Encourage each other to 'lean into' the grief
- 💧 Active & reflective listening to each other
- 💧 Allow each other to be vulnerable and let their partner know them in this time
- 💧 Don't compare each other's grief
- 💧 Try not to blame one another for the loss
- 💧 Awareness, patience and compassion for each other
- 💧 Avoid unhelpful coping strategies – alcohol/drugs , turning elsewhere for support avoiding working on their relationship
- 💧 Ritualize & Memorialize the loss together
- 💧 Prepare to just survive day to day
- 💧 Commit to healing together
- 💧 Accept that sometimes relationships don't make it after loss

Manage your feelings of grief

- Talk to family or friends
- Seek counselling
- Read poetry or books & Listen to music
- Activate resources together
- Engage in social activities
- Exercise
- Eat healthy, good foods
- Understand about grief and different ways you both cope
- Seek spiritual support
- Take time to relax, together and separately
- Join a support group
- Be patient with yourself
- Let yourself feel grief
- Lower your expectations of each other

About Grief

- Length of the grief process is different for everyone
- No predictable grief schedule
- The grief process should not be rushed
- Important to be patient with yourself as you experience your unique reactions to the loss with time and support, things generally do get better
- However, it is normal for significant dates, holidays, or other reminders to trigger feelings related to the loss
- Taking care of yourself, seeking support, and acknowledging your feelings during these times are ways that can help you cope
- more often experienced in cycles / waves
- sometimes compared to climbing a spiral staircase where things can look and feel like you are just going in circles, yet you are actually making progress
- Your cultural background can affect how you understand and approach the grief process

Grow Around the Grief Together

From Lois Tonkin

“As we grieve, we struggle to give new sense and direction to the continuing stories of our lives”.

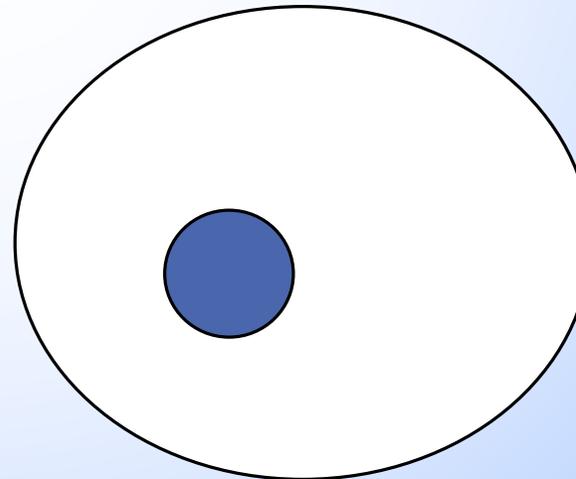
(Attig 1996, p.149)



This is the grief we feel all consuming of our life



We imagine that our grief will diminish within the same space



The grief is just the same but our life has grown and developed around it

For Health Care Providers to think about

- Danish investigators found that mortality rates due to unnatural causes (eg. accidents and suicide) were higher among bereaved mothers and fathers particularly for deaths within the first 3 years after the child's death (Rogers 2008)
- Early recognition may facilitate longer-term adjustment for both partners. (Vance 2002)
- Parents with a history of prior loss should have assessments carefully tailored to their experiences to anticipate continued psychological distress. (Armstrong, & Hutti 2009)
- It's not just about the mother - each partner may need different support – one size does not fit all

Perinatal Grief Intensity Scale

💧 Predicting grief intensity after recent perinatal loss

💧 <http://uoflnursingpgis.org/pgis/>



This survey helps health care providers (HCPs) to better recognize those who are likely to have intense grief after an early or late pregnancy loss or death of an infant.

At the end of the survey, you will have the opportunity to submit your results for research. All information collected is anonymous and cannot be traced back to you.



Gold's 2010 Recommendations

- ▶ Providers who care for bereaved families should recognize that selected parents would benefit from relationship support or counselling.
- ▶ Additional research is warranted to identify the specific risks and protective factors that influence relationship survival
- ▶ to evaluate whether specific bereavement interventions can improve long-term marriage and cohabitation outcomes after miscarriages and stillbirths.
- ▶ One interesting hypothesis to consider is whether there might be characteristics that not only put a couple at risk for separation but also place their pregnancy at risk for miscarriage or stillbirth.
- ▶ For example, mental illness, such as depression and anxiety, has been associated with pregnancy loss and can be stressful for a relationship

There is always hope

Thank you to all of my children:
to Kev and Katy, here today
to Stephen who lived for a day - my angel,
and to my two angels who were never named.
I am here because of them and for them.

For References and questions

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