

TALK ABOUT IT

It's estimated between 15 and 20 per cent of women will experience miscarriage, although it's a difficult figure to pinpoint because many go unreported.

What is certain, says Caroline Zanetti, director of psychiatry at St John of God's Raphael Centre, is that those who have experienced such a loss need to talk about it. "You can't just lock it away in a little part of your brain — to process anything we need to talk about it. You need to accept that you're sad and other people need to acknowledge your loss and not push you away."

Women who have a miscarriage before 12 weeks in gestation often feel isolated because they may not have told many people they were pregnant, particularly at work, and then have nowhere to turn in their grief. "What people don't realise is that by the time you know you're pregnant, you are already planning well ahead about this new person who is going to be in your life — you have a lot invested in it," she says. "Sometimes people feel they can't go on talking about their loss because others won't think it's a valid thing to feel sad about."

We're also inclined to tell ourselves things like "it was for the best, we weren't ready" or "there must have been something wrong" as a way of coping. But pushing feelings of sadness away can cause long-term problems. "At the centre we have a lot of people who have had a previous loss and a lot of issues come up for them with the next baby," Dr Zanetti says. "It will surprise you how much you think about the baby that might have been."

The loss can also affect the next generation. "When your own mother has experienced perinatal loss, that can have a very big impact not only on your upbringing, with the shadow of the child that might have been growing up with you, it can also make you very anxious about pregnancy in general. It has reverberations down the generations, particularly if it's not dealt with."

While it is normal to be sad and angry, you need to talk to someone to help you through and ensure you don't end up feeling so hopeless and pessimistic that it affects your wellbeing. "You need to talk to someone who will listen, that's the most important thing," she says, whether that's a GP, close friend or family member. "You shouldn't hold back. If you're not sure whether or not you need help, go and find out."

WA commemorated World Pregnancy and Infant Loss Remembrance Day for the first time in October, and Dr Zanetti believes ceremonies and rituals can be great healers. "I do think that people make their own, however, and it's got to be meaningful for the person, even if it's just 'whenever I sit under this tree, I will think of you'. It needs to be your ceremony." » **Julie Hosking**

« jealousy, I was truly happy for them. As I sat at dinner with one of them, listening to her talk about all the things she'd learnt about what she can and can't do during her pregnancy, I wondered what was stopping me from telling her. The last thing I wanted was to break down in a public place but it was more than that — I couldn't put my finger on it but at a time when the support of my friends was paramount, I found I couldn't speak. How ironic. And sad.

What helps me in difficult situations is knowledge. I must have read and searched for hours before I came across a website for Bears of Hope (bearsofhope.org.au). The foundation's advice on what not to say to women who have had a miscarriage really resonated. "It wouldn't have survived anyway." "You were only x weeks thankfully." "At least you know you can get pregnant." "There must have been something wrong with it." As Bears of Hope explained, these statements don't help. "Your friend wanted THIS baby," it said. "She had hopes for THIS child." I breathed a huge sigh of relief. Finally something helpful, something that told me that all the things I was feeling were OK. I felt validated, understood and, most of all, I didn't feel as alone anymore.

The foundation provides support, counselling and education to women in my situation and gives support packs and teddy bears to women miscarrying in hospital. At first I didn't get that last

bit. Then I read the testimonials and I thought back to how lonely I was feeling and I understood. The bear let these women know that they weren't alone; it gave them comfort and a beautiful reminder of the life that was lost.

I texted the few friends who knew I was pregnant about the loss. Some knew out of necessity, such as my chefs at work, others had guessed. What amazed me the most, however, was the number who said "Ohhhh I'm so sorry, that happened to us as well". What! How did I not know about this massive event in my friends' lives? It turns out most of them had suffered alone. Like me, they had only a few friends who knew of their loss, some only had their partner for support.

Out of those people I eventually told, only three had not experienced the pain of this loss. Another, who was seven months pregnant with her first child, came over for dinner a few days after my miscarriage. True to form, I had kept our date but seeing her big belly broke me and I fell apart in her arms.

Another friend I called had children but had never had a miscarriage. She proceeded, in her best-intentioned, kind-hearted way, to say all the things you're not meant to say. As my frustration grew, I reminded myself she only wanted to help. It was then I realised that I had become part of an exclusive club I never wanted to join and the only people who would truly understand were my fellow members. I stopped telling anyone I thought hadn't been through this — I couldn't risk that conversation again.

The only friend I had known to have gone through

such heartbreak before my miscarriage had given birth to her stillborn baby. I hadn't spoken to her in two years but I knew she'd be there for me. I texted her "I need you, can you please call me when you have a sec?" My phone rang immediately.

"Honey, what's wrong?" she asked.

"I just had a miscarriage," I told her.

"Honey, that's f...ed!" she said.

"Yes, thank you!" I cried back. "It IS f...ed and unfair and wrong and s... and well and truly f...ed!"

With relieved glee, I told her about the couple in the waiting room and she understood and ranted with me. It was the exact therapy I needed to rid myself of the building tension I was carrying.

The only way I can explain it to people who say "Oh, you were only six weeks along, it wasn't even a baby" is this: I'm not grieving the blighted ovum I lost, I'm grieving the baby I wanted it to grow into. In the short time I was pregnant, that little fertilised egg and I had become very, very close.

Every second of the day I knew it was there: it made me constantly sick, gave me a superhuman sense of smell, stopped me drinking coffee and wine, and even had me rethinking my usual after-lunch chocolate habit. In my mind that little egg was turning into a little wiggling baby who was due in October and the clock was counting down each day.

All I can say to people who have never experienced miscarriage is to be gentle; read the "What to say to friends" on the Bears of Hope website and educate yourself in case you are one day privileged enough to have a friend confide her secret. To the women who may one day have their dreams shattered, please know you are not alone and please, please, take the time you need to grieve. Nothing you need to do to allow yourself to grieve is wrong. In our case, we planted a tree and buried the many, many pregnancy tests I had kept.

My miscarriage still affects me well into my second pregnancy and each time I feel the tears welling up, I give in to them. I mourn the loss of my first baby even while feeling joyful at the arrival of my second. Be prepared for miscarriage to take the gloss off your next pregnancy — your excitement is tempered with a large amount of reality and fear and you find yourself counting down the long days until that magic 12-week mark is reached.

My story is not special. It's just one of many. But I hope by telling it I can encourage more women not to suffer in silence and help stop those crushing feelings of loneliness so many experience. If my story encourages others to share theirs, and helps get rid of the taboo around discussing this incredibly common and yet incredibly devastating event, then it's worth it.

At the very least, if someone is ever curled up on their bathroom floor like I was, in the throes of miscarrying their child, they'll know that they're not alone. Welcome to the club. **WW**

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