

Navigating Traumatic Grief

After pregnancy and infant loss, including infertility, miscarriage, stillbirth, infant death, and ending a wanted pregnancy

Pregnancy and infant losses are in a category of their own. To lose a baby or the hope for a baby is the most traumatic and devastating type of loss a human can endure. The pain from this grief may be unlike any other grief you have experienced before. You may wonder if you will ever make it through this.

Finding support is essential and can come in many forms. Because the lived experience of our love and loss touches all aspects of our life, a holistic approach to care is often more effective.

What Is Grief?

- A natural part of the human experience
- Unique to the griever
- Heartache needing to be witnessed
- The mirror of your love
- Complex, continuous, and unpredictable
- A living process that becomes a part of your body, mind, and spirit

What Grief Is Not

Linear, something you can control, rational, passive

What Traumatic Grief Can Look Like

- Feeling sad, irritable, or angry
- Feelings of insecurity, guilt, and low self-worth
- Worry
- Flashbacks to the loss
- Inability to remember the loss experience
- Inability to concentrate, being in a mental fog, recurring thoughts, or feeling disconnected from reality
- Feeling lethargic, unable to move, moving slowly, or feeling keyed up or jumpy
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Significant weight loss or gain
- Avoiding people or places that might remind you of the loss
- Racing heart, rapid breathing, nausea, or diarrhea

The Grieving Experience

- There is no right or wrong way to grieve.
- There is no established length of time for the process.
- No two people grieve the same way.
- Different feelings surface at different times.
- Most grief is experienced internally through intense feelings and physical symptoms. Some people feel numb.

Secondary Losses

- The future you were hoping for
- Your innocence
- Your identity
- Trust in your body
- Trust in the health care system
- Religious or spiritual certitude
- Control
- All the “firsts” with your baby
- Fertility or ability to conceive

Common Responses to Loss

- Grief
- Post-traumatic stress
- Postpartum mood and anxiety disorders (depression, anxiety, OCD)
- Unearthing of unresolved grief or trauma

Signs of Struggle

It is likely your healing process is being blocked if after a certain period of time there is continued:

- insistent thoughts of not being able to go on (suicidal thoughts, wanting to die).
- insistent rumination and preoccupation with thoughts about the causes and consequences of your loss (if only, could of, would of, should of).
- significant impairment in social functioning and ability to return to your life.
- highly charged emotions that are not diminishing.
- severe isolation and avoidance of the outside world.
- suppression of thoughts about your loss.
- refusal to talk about loss experience.
- unrelenting anger about your loss.
- trauma responses to every reminder of your loss (every thought, picture, place becomes a trigger).
- struggle with accepting the loss.
- blaming, criticizing, and judging yourself for the loss and how you are processing your grief.
- resistance to feeling moments of joy and living forward energy.

Contributing Factors Impacting Grieving Process

- Death and dying are taboo topics and avoided
- Medicalization of the dying process
- Disappearance of rituals and ceremonies our ancestors once used to honor the dead and support the grieving
- Lack of established cultural or religious norms centered around pregnancy and infant loss
- Cultural, religious, and familial beliefs and biases
- No paid maternity leave or bereavement leave
- Pressures to return to work
- Not having any answers for baby's death

What Can Be Helpful

- Begin working with a mental health provider. Support ensures that your experience is as bearable as it can be.
- Attend a bereavement support group. Peer support is essential.
- Have one family member/friend check on you daily.
- Limit social media. It can be difficult to see others depict the "ideal" when life is uncertain.
- Move your body. While it can be so difficult to move, even a walk with a loved one or stretching at home can help release tension.
- Sleep. Find a way to protect your sleep, and talk to your doctor if you aren't able to sleep.
- Nutrition. Be sure you are getting proper nutrition; sometimes a solid meal can help break up mental fog.

Finding Support

- Support needs are individual to each person.
- What you need at this time may differ from what you need in the future.
- You may need multiple types of support.
- The quality of the relationship you have with your provider (trust, connection, safety) is highly important.



For more information, resources, and support, scan or visit [Janesroom.org](https://www.janesroom.org).

