

Openly discussing the hidden pain of miscarriage

By CARINA DEVI

All around you, women are silently grieving, attending meetings and potlucks — going about business as usual. Their bodies and hormones are freshly postpartum, a time that needs great support, care and emotional nurturance. It is easy to understand a woman with a new baby who stays home to rest and process the great unfolding in her psyche, identity and body; but a woman who has just miscarried has the same needs. Instead of a baby, she carries her grief with her, an invisible weight that becomes heavier each time she is asked to carry on as if nothing has happened.

Postpartum care for mothers of full-term babies is already lacking. But when a woman is freshly postpartum from a baby the world does not see, she feels invisible as well.

We are at a loss for how to discuss miscarriage, how women can share that they have had one, and how to support the women around us after they have lost a baby. With one in every three women experiencing at least one pregnancy loss in their lifetime, it's time for us to open up the conversation.

While I believe that this is a discussion — and therefore requires many voices in order to gain a broader view — here is what I believe we must do when a woman we know has miscarried.

Be ready to listen with full presence and zero judgment. There is an unfortunate culture of shame and secrecy around miscarriage. Perhaps the only place to find relief from the internalized grief and confusion of pregnancy loss is within a woman's circle of friends. In my circle, miscarriage is a common topic and one we are figuring



out how to discuss it more openly as time goes on. These are vibrant, communicative, and bravely vulnerable women. And yet, they feel shamed into swallowing their miscarriage experiences by unspoken beliefs about how the loss of a baby reflects on the mother. While being heard does not heal the pain of losing a child, not feeling heard greatly increases it. Additionally, no two miscarriages are alike and we cannot assume that we know what she is experiencing, even if we have miscarried ourselves. Listen to the women around you and be someone whom they would feel safe to share with.

Be with her in what she's feeling rather than trying to make her feel better. I'm sure that everyone who has miscarried has heard some version of "this is just your body getting ready" or "at least you can get pregnant." It is natural to

search for a silver lining when we sit with someone in grief. We want to end the discomfort, to soothe, and to make things better. But there frankly is no way to make a miscarriage less painful, except through a woman's own journey and time. She may arrive at a conclusion such as, "the timing wasn't right," but that is hers alone to accept. I believe that the high prevalence of miscarriage presents a bittersweet opportunity to learn how to be with others through painful times. When we meet someone at their most vulnerable and truthfully say, "I don't know what to do or say right now, but I'm here," that can be the most refreshing thing to hear.

Ask her what she needs, and don't forget her partner. When a woman loses a baby and visits her doctor, she is subject to a barrage of tests, phone calls, appointments and questions from medical provid-



Strategies

ers and staff. It often feels like more emotional labor than a woman who is postpartum and grieving can handle. The focus may be on measures that support her body's full release of the pregnancy in these appointments. But there is a world of grief, fear, pain, confusion and deep sadness that may not occur to her medical care providers. While we can safely assume that she is in need of emotional support, we don't know what form is most meaningful to her.

Ask her what she needs. If she is unsure, offer a variety of ways to support her that include rest, good nutrition, loving care for her body, distraction with a project or funny movie, or to simply be with her. Then let her choose. And don't forget that partners are grieving, too. They need care, rest and nurturance just as mamas do.

Let's open up the discussion around miscarriage so that it is no longer something shrouded in secrecy. Someone you know could miscarry tomorrow — how can you prepare to be someone they would come to for support?

What do you wish someone would have done after you or your partner miscarried?

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