
REPORT:

AFTER LOSS

The grief of a miscarriage is often unspoken and the workplace provisions often non-existent. JENNIFER CHEN speaks to the people trying to change all that.

“We are not alone in our loss, but we often feel like we are the only ones going

In 2016, New Zealander Kathryn van Beek found out during a pregnancy scan that her baby was dying. She went home and cried all day. Van Beek, a writer, took four days of sick leave for her miscarriage, one of which was for surgery. As her statutory sick days dwindled, she researched New Zealand’s Holidays Act and discovered that it allowed for bereavement leave if your child dies. Did that provision include her? “I thought it was important to clarify the wording so anyone who needed the leave could take it,” Van Beek told me via email. She wrote to her local Member of Parliament, Clare Curran. Much to her surprise, Curran replied and took the cause to Parliament. Labour MP Ginny Andersen drafted the Bereavement Leave for Miscarriage Bill, which offers three paid bereavement days for people who have lost a pregnancy, their partners or those aiming to have a child through adoption or surrogacy. During her final reading of the bill, which was signed into law in March 2021, Andersen tweeted: “This is a Bill about workers’ rights and fairness. I hope it gives people time to grieve and promotes greater openness about miscarriage. We should not be fearful of our bodies.”

New Zealand isn’t the first country to offer paid leave for a pregnancy loss. In fact, its three-day allowance is paltry compared to the handful of others with policies in place. India allows for six weeks leave following a

miscarriage, although the law only applies to women who work at a company with 10 employees or more. The Philippines gives women 60 days of paid leave. Women in the Canadian province of Ontario who miscarry in the second half of their pregnancy can take 17 weeks of unpaid pregnancy leave. In the UK, the end of a pregnancy before 24 weeks doesn’t qualify for bereavement leave, but a woman who has a stillborn after 24 weeks can take maternity leave.

In the United States, there are no federal laws in place for pregnancy loss leave. A few years ago, I suffered two miscarriages in California—one at 10 weeks and another at six weeks. After the first, I took two days off from work to recoup after a botched dilation and curettage. For the second loss, I took no time off. A few months after my first miscarriage, I wrote a personal essay for *BuzzFeed* about my experience of loss and grief. I was terrified to share such news openly, but I knew I wasn’t alone. Hundreds of people reached out to me with their own stories.

Breaking the silence around miscarriage is an important step toward supporting families in their grief. Trystan Reese, a transgender man, lost his first pregnancy just shy of six weeks, an experience he shared on the parenting podcast, *The Longest Shortest Time*. “Even when I started to talk about my trans pregnancy

story publicly, I was told, ‘Do not talk about having a pregnancy loss,’” Reese tells me over Zoom. “Particularly through the trans lens, so much of what we hear is that it’s already unnatural for us to have children.”

But pregnancy loss is not uncommon or unnatural: One in four pregnancies ends in miscarriage. “Miscarriage is a strange kind of loss because it’s so private, and that means it can be overlooked,” Van Beek tells me.

The secrecy of the loss is interconnected with how we talk about pregnancy as a whole. Typically, people don’t share their pregnancy news with friends and family until after the first trimester, usually around 12 weeks, after which the chances of miscarrying are significantly lower. There is a logic to this—it can be extremely painful to “retract” the news that a baby is coming from those most excited to hear it—but it also stems from the stigma that surrounds miscarrying. After my pregnancy loss, I was initially reluctant to speak about it for fear of judgement. But when I did tell two friends about what had happened, they in turn shared their experiences of miscarriage with me.

We are not alone in our loss, but we often feel like we are the only ones going through it. Sharing our pregnancy stories—the good, the bad and the scary—not only opens the door to honest, vulnerable conversations, but also provides a realistic picture of the process.

In the workplace, there are also more

practical considerations: People hide bumps or pregnancy symptoms because of the host of ways in which they fear pregnancy might disadvantage them. One study, from the UK’s Equality and Human Right’s Commission, found that around one in nine respondents had been dismissed or pushed out of jobs during pregnancy. For someone to feel safe talking about a miscarriage at work, they must first feel comfortable “outing” themselves as someone who is thinking about having children. “Workplaces and workplace cultures were initially built for men, and we are living in a time when women and non-binary people are advocating for ourselves and trying to make our workplaces work for us,” says Van Beek

During a meeting with his boss, Reese burst into tears and disclosed his miscarriage months after the fact. He had never told his boss that he was trying to get pregnant so they had never talked about his loss. “I didn’t know how to talk about it, especially as a transgender man... but feelings don’t go away just because you don’t talk about them,” says Reese.

Now, as the CEO of Collaborate Consulting, Reese works with corporations and nonprofits to develop inclusive workplace policies. He believes that the language used for paid leave should be as inclusive as possible, and include all family members. To help families navigate their way through the grief of pregnancy loss, he recommends

through it. Sharing pregnancy stories opens the door to honest conversations.”

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companies offer workers flexible paid time off: “Let them take what is offered, and choose for themselves how to implement that time,” he says.

Fleda Mask Jackson, an educator and the creator of Save 100 Babies, an organization based in Atlanta, Georgia, which is campaigning to reduce Black infant mortality, suggests companies consider their employees’ overall health if they need a reason to take miscarriage provisions more seriously. “Depression, as the result of miscarriage, that is not addressed before a new pregnancy, has serious implications for birth outcomes and for the subsequent physical and emotional health of the mother and baby,” she says. “Most people suffer in silence after the physical manifestations of miscarriage are addressed medically.” These stresses are particularly acute for Black women, she says. “Stress from the lived experiences of racism

and sexism, which is documented as a significant contributor to worse pregnancy, birth and maternal outcomes for Black American women, is likely a contributor to the higher rates of miscarriage that are recorded for African American women.”

After my miscarriage, I convinced myself I had adequately addressed the loss in therapy. Then, during a shopping trip to Target with my husband, I wandered into the baby aisle. I can handle this, I thought, but as I perused rows of cute onesies and baby bottles, I felt my heart pound. Suddenly, I could feel the beginnings of a panic attack. I darted out of the aisle toward my husband. “I have to leave right now,” I said. Grief pops up when we least expect it.

My hope is that as we collectively work toward a more equitable world and workplace, we don’t have to endure in silence any more. After all, even the most well-thought-out miscarriage leave policies can only be used if a person is willing to talk about what they’re going through. The Miscarriage Association, a UK-based organization, runs a website bursting with advice and useful precedents for employees and the self-employed: getting a doctor’s note, managing a phased return to work, clarifying confidentiality. Among the pages of pragmatism one line of comfort stands out to me: “[People] may be more understanding than you think.” **k**

Our writer Jennifer also spoke to Ginny Andersen, the Labour MP who drafted New Zealand’s Bereavement Leave for Miscarriage Bill, for this feature. “Grief isn’t a sickness, it’s a loss, and loss takes time,” Andersen told her. She recommends that private companies, when creating policies surrounding miscarriage, “leave it open enough that the person can lead what their recovery looks like, so they can do what’s best for them.”

We understand that this piece might be difficult or upsetting to read. There are now several organizations that offer support for pregnancy loss including Share Pregnancy and Infant Loss Support in the USA and The Miscarriage Association in the UK. If you live elsewhere, both organizations have online communities or can point you toward support networks closer to home.

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