

Patients - Perinatal Grief

Perinatal Grief | Information for Parents

What is perinatal grief?

Perinatal Grief occurs after the death of a baby (either by miscarriage, ectopic pregnancy, termination, or stillbirth) during pregnancy, birth, or within the first month after their birth. The death of a baby can be caused by preterm birth, birth defects, or other health conditions.

What does it feel like to experience perinatal grief?

Bereaved parents will often fluctuate through the five Stages of Grief: Denial, Anger, Depression, Bargaining, and Acceptance (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Grief is a very personal experience and the grief process is not always linear. You may find yourself bouncing back and forth among the various stages.

- **Denial:** Your initial response may be one of shock, disbelief, and confusion. There will be moments you may behave as if you never experienced the loss.
- **Anger:** You may ask “Why me? Why did my body fail?” You may blame your higher power or your partner or your healthcare professional. You may feel a lot of shame and guilt.
- **Depression:** With loss, depression may predominate. Common feelings include helplessness, isolation from peers and family, struggling to find emotional resilience for your partner, and grieving the loss of the future.
- **Bargaining:** During this stage, feelings of guilt might lead you to avoid feelings of grief through negotiation (e.g., “I promise to be a better person if I get pregnant again and do not have a repeat loss”). You might also experience many “what if” and/or “if only” thoughts such as, “What if I had gone to the doctor sooner? Then maybe my baby could have been saved.”
- **Acceptance:** You may experience reconciliation of the loss, a restored capacity to feel pleasure. You might be ready to explore alternative family planning options.

How does perinatal grief differ from other forms of grief?

The major difference with perinatal loss is that the death is of someone who has not been born yet or was not living a long time. Perinatal loss involves not only the physical loss of a baby, but also the emotional loss. Perinatal loss is often challenging because the parent does not have any memories of their baby, just their imagination. Therefore, many parents grieve about the imagined life they would have had with their baby. It is common to grieve over what might have been, who your baby may have been, and the time you would have spent together.

Treatment options

- Couples counseling
- Support groups

- Psychotherapy that focuses on emotion regulation, promoting positive self-talk, reconstructing the narrative around the baby's death, and finding ways to connect with others

- Finding ways to honor your loss (e.g., creating rituals, maintaining the child's place in the family, etc.)

If you find your symptoms are overwhelming and you are unable to function in your role as a parent or partner, or you are unable to complete your responsibilities at work or school, you should reach out to your physician or advanced practice provider to request further assistance.