

Sharing

the Sadness

of

Miscarriage

As more and more moms courageously go public with their pregnancy losses, *Parents* shines a light on what it takes to open up and how this inspiring trend could change motherhood for the better—forever.

by **JEAN TWENGE, Ph.D.**

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THE DECEMBER after our daughter turned 2 was happily frenetic, with my parents visiting from out of town and my husband and me playing Santa for the first time with a child old enough to be excited by presents. The day after Christmas, I got a gift myself: a positive pregnancy test. Soon after telling my husband, I shared the news with my mom and two of my friends. I had happy dreams about an early-September baby and buying a mother's ring with my favorite gem—sapphire, September's birthstone.

Five days later, I started to spot, and by that afternoon I was no longer pregnant. The baby I thought would be our second child was gone in an instant, along with the plans I now felt I was foolish to have made. It was a very early loss, but it still felt like the death of possibility for me, especially at age 37 with an irregular menstrual cycle. To make matters worse, I was also embarrassed. I'm a social psychologist who wrote a book on fertility. What was I thinking, telling my parents and

friends that early? Why was I sad, when other women had miscarriages when they were much further along?

Those emotions were only compounded when I tried to talk to friends about my loss. "Don't be sad," some said. But I was. "You can try again," said others. But I wanted this one. "At least you can get pregnant," said still others. But I didn't know if I'd be able to conceive again. At times I wondered if I should have simply kept the news to myself.



That was ten years ago. My loss occurred when Facebook was mostly for college kids, Instagram didn't exist, and no one knew what a #rainbowbaby was. (If you're in the dark, the term refers to a child who is born just after a miscarriage, a stillbirth, or an infant death and whose existence personifies the hope that can come out of grief.) Just as they always had, the vast majority of women then viewed pregnancy loss as a painful secret—and consequently, commiseration was scarce.

Today, as celebrities from Mark Zuckerberg to Beyoncé to *Six*'s Brianne Davis (see opposite) come forward with their losses, women across the nation are following suit in raw Facebook posts, heartfelt emails, group texts, and face-to-face conversations. And instead of suffering silently and solo, grieving women are finding one another.

We still have a long way to go: Two thirds of women who've miscarried say they feel they can't even talk to their best friend about it, according to a 2015 poll of 6,000 women conducted by Tommy's, a miscarriage-research nonprofit in the United Kingdom. But the tide is undoubtedly turning on this taboo—and there are big and surprising implications for the health and well-being of women everywhere.

Shifting the Blame

Historians have found seeds of miscarriage stigma that date as far back as the Middle Ages, when a woman's failure to provide a male heir was a deep source of shame. "It was her marital duty to give birth to a son who could take over the farm or the shop and bring in a fortune through his bride's dowry," explains Edward Shorter, Ph.D., professor of the history of medicine at the University of Toronto. "The miscarriage stigma was largely an economic one." What's more, because the reasons for miscarriage were a medical mystery until fairly recently, mothers were always considered to be the problem. Back in the 1500s, English physician Thomas Reynalde wrote that dancing or leaping; feeling angry, sad, or suddenly joyful; and spending too much time in the cold air could all lead to "aborsement," the 16th-century word for pregnancy loss.

What to Say to a Friend Who Has Miscarried

The women *Parents* spoke with all agreed on these two points: You should treat a miscarriage as the loss of life, no matter how early in a pregnancy it occurs. And if you don't know what to say, you can't go wrong with "I'm sorry for your loss." No one is ever going to be hurt by that, says Karen Kelly, founder of the national nonprofit organization *Through the Heart*, which provides women with miscarriage support and education. **Three phrases to avoid: "It's not meant to be right now," "Everything happens for a reason," and "There will be others." Be sure to check in with your friend or family member in the days and weeks ahead, Kelly adds. "The pain doesn't go away instantly for most women, but the support often does."**

Centuries later, the long-term consequences of all this mom-shaming and mom-blaming are plain to see. Women traditionally keep mum about their pregnancies until the "safe" three-month mark and hide their grief if they miscarry anytime along the way. More than half of adults believe that miscarriage occurs in less than one in 20 pregnancies, when the real figure is at least one in five, according to a national survey of more than 1,000 adults in the U.S. published in *Obstetrics and Gynecology*. And false beliefs about the causes of miscarriages are still pervasive. About 64 percent of those in the study believed lifting a heavy object could cause a miscarriage, and 21 percent thought getting into an argument could be the trigger.

A shocking 41 percent of men and women who had experienced a

miscarriage (either themselves or their partner) felt they had done something wrong. In reality, miscarriages are almost always caused by factors that are outside of the mother's control—most commonly, genetic abnormalities in the embryo.

These misconceptions have a direct psychological impact on grieving mothers. Studies have shown that pregnancy loss can be traumatizing, isolating, guilt-provoking, and difficult to disclose. Research in *Family Relations* found that the absence of support from friends makes these symptoms worse and can increase a mother's risk of depression. Renee Cowan, M.D., who recently completed her ob-gyn residency in Washington, D.C., diagnosed and treated hundreds of women for miscarriage during that time. "Yet when I miscarried, I was totally unprepared for the sadness surrounding the loss, the anxiety surrounding being pregnant again, all of it," she says. "I had drastically underestimated the emotional toll."

For Esther Augenbaum, a mom of two in Silver Spring, Maryland, miscarriage was a source of deep embarrassment. "I felt like it was my fault," she says. "I only told my husband and my parents, and the first thing my husband said was, 'It's a normal part of life and happens to so many people.' I know he meant well and was trying to be my emotional rock, but all I heard was 'Stop crying—you're overreacting.'" When she miscarried a second time, Augenbaum opened up to scores of friends. "Some told me the same thing had happened to them, which was very comforting. Sharing with them gave me so much more strength." In the *Obstetrics and Gynecology* survey, 46 percent of respondents said that having friends who discussed their miscarriage with them helped them feel less isolated.

An expectant mother's go-to support network is typically her family. But in the face of miscarriage, many women find that the greatest comfort and solace come from those who have also suffered a pregnancy loss—and frequently, that isn't their partner, sibling, parent, or even a close confidant.

But it just might be one of their Facebook friends.

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“Tell Everybody. Speak Your Pain.”

In a *Parents* exclusive, **Brianne Davis**, star of *Six* on the History channel, reveals what it felt like to lose her first pregnancy.

As told to Erin Bried

WHEN I found out I was pregnant for the first time, I FaceTimed my husband, Mark, right away. He was at our home in Los Angeles and I was in Wilmington, North Carolina, filming *Six*. You should’ve seen our faces. They were a mix of surprise and pure terror. Can we raise a kid? I’d just gotten the job, so it wasn’t the best timing, but still, we were so happy. We told our families immediately, but I kept it a secret from my costars and producers.

At 9 weeks, I went to an ob-gyn in Wilmington and heard the heartbeat. It felt like the sky opened up. There was so much love. Then, a week later, I woke up at 4 A.M. with horrible cramps and started bleeding. I was alone in this rented house, and I can’t describe the terror. I was thinking, “Please, God, make everything okay.” But in the back of my mind, I knew this wasn’t good. I called my husband, crying. Then I called my mom in Atlanta, and she got in her car as soon as we hung up.

I had to be on set in three hours, and all I wanted to do

was ball up in bed. By the time I left the house, I was already grieving. Almost unbelievably, the scene I had to shoot that day was at the grave of a child my character had lost, and my character was supposed to be stone-cold, no tears. Filming it was one of the most difficult things I’d ever done. I told the producers, the director, and my costar what was happening, and they were devastated for me. After the scene ended, I started hyperventilating. My mom, who’d arrived by then, drove me straight to the doctor.

The exam room was silent except for my crying. I already knew the answer. There was no heartbeat. Instead of having a D&C, I opted for the pills that cause contractions, because we were still shooting and I didn’t want to delay things. What a mistake! Before long, I was in so much pain that my mom rushed me to the hospital. They kept me overnight, and I had the D&C in the morning. By then, my husband had arrived. Seeing him walk into the room was like seeing an angel.

THE CELEBRITY FACTOR

Every mom who publicly shares news of miscarriage is helping to fight stigma. But when a famous mom opens up, the impact is staggering. In the *Obstetrics and Gynecology* survey, 28 percent of women with early-pregnancy loss said that hearing celebrities disclose their miscarriages helped them feel less alone.

Megan Petrosino, of Toms River, New Jersey, credits *The Big Bang Theory* actress Melissa Rauch’s miscarriage confession as the reason she came out to her own social network. “She wrote all of my feelings in one article, and it touched me,” says Petrosino. “Sharing about my miscarriage was one of my proudest moments as a woman, because I felt like I helped other women not feel so alone.”

Westchester mom Suzanne Delio was moved by actress Hilarie Burton’s recent birth announcement, which included a candid account of her long and troubled journey to pregnancy, including miscarriages. “It was so poignant, I cried and cried,” says Delio. “Fertility, pregnancy, motherhood—it’s hard for many of us in one way or another.”

When you miscarry, it’s hard not to blame yourself. You replay everything in your head. What if, before I knew I was pregnant, I hadn’t had that glass of wine or hadn’t worked out so hard? It turns out I had a small fibroid, and the pregnancy hormones made it grow faster than the baby. The fibroid took nutrients from the fetus.

When we got back home, my husband made calls to our family, because it was too hard for me. As a woman, I feel

like I’m built to have babies, so I struggled with feeling inadequate. But, of course, keeping it a secret keeps in the sadness. After I got through the initial pain, I started talking about my miscarriage, and that’s when my healing began.

Many of my girlfriends told me they had been through miscarriage too! I felt less alone and less ashamed. Only one person said something stupid: “Well, at least you don’t have to get fat.” But everyone else was there for me.

Five months later, I started preparing my body again. I had a myomectomy to remove my fibroid and took vitamins and received fertility acupuncture. We got the green light to start trying two months later, but I didn’t feel ready, so we waited six months more. Then we conceived right away.

I was shooting our second season in Vancouver when I took the test. Mark and I were so happy, but I was worried too. I woke up almost every night, thinking that 4 A.M. situation would happen again. Trauma doesn’t go away.

But now I feel stronger. I also feel blessed that I get to talk about my loss, because when I hear others share their pain, it reminds me that we all go through horrible things we can’t control. I’m lucky my story has a happy ending. Many believe in rainbow babies, but that’s not how I see my newborn. I think the same spirit who tried to come has now made it, and I feel that Davis Nolan Gantt will be the kindest, sweetest soul in the world.



AT LONG LAST, JOY! Davis’s beautiful baby boy, Davis Nolan Gantt, arrived on April 21, 2018.



The Newsfeed Effect

At first glance, Anna Myers's Facebook post looked a bit like a pregnancy announcement. But when her friends and relatives read closely, the truth was clear. The Indiana mom of four had posted a picture of her family's hands holding an ultrasound photo, and alongside it, her sad news: "I would be 11 weeks tomorrow, but our sweet baby died a couple weeks ago." The post received 200 supportive comments, including one in which a friend revealed her own miscarriage. "It turned out to be such a good way to get support. I don't have family living nearby, so social media is one way I stay connected with my relatives and childhood friends," says Myers. "I got so many responses and virtual hugs at once. I was able to heal a lot faster, and it helped that so many people found out so quickly."

Many women say that social media gives them the control they need and desire when they tell their stories. "I didn't have to say the words out loud," says Crystal Henry, who lives in San Antonio. "I didn't have to steady my voice or fight back tears. I could cry

when I typed it out, and I then could have genuine reactions to people's comments. I could stop reading comments that were hurtful, and I could reread comments that were helpful."

But the decision to post isn't easy for every mom. For some, the rapidly shifting social norms around miscarriage have left them feeling pulled in opposite directions. When Mikela Jewel Nelson, of Carson City, Nevada, miscarried at 14 weeks, she was cautioned about sharing the news too widely. "I had three other friends who were all due the same week as I was, and someone said to me, 'Don't scare people like that,'" says Nelson. "I took that under consideration, but what I was going through was a struggle, too, and as scary as it was, it was real."

Opening up about her miscarriage was about more than just her experience. "Being quiet about miscarriage makes women who miscarry feel like a disgrace—like we're not the same as everyone else," Nelson says. Although she agrees that women who miscarry should think about other people's feelings, she says, "People should care about ours too."

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Expecting a #Rainbowbaby

When a woman who has miscarried gets pregnant again, the anxiety can be overwhelming. Even though my own loss was early, I had no idea why I miscarried, so I worried constantly that a hormonal issue would cost me my next pregnancy. Karen Kelly, of Alexandria, Virginia, had a similar experience when she became pregnant with her son Ryan, who is now almost 2. "Everything was going perfectly, but I couldn't help feeling like something bad was going to happen. As we passed certain milestones, the anxiety eased slightly, but it never went away."

For Suzanne Delio, a mom of 2-year-old twins in Westchester, New York, losing two prior pregnancies gave her the gift of perspective. "Morning sickness? Awesome! Swollen feet? Great! Constant exhaustion? Loved it! Boys or girls? Who cares! I knew the alternative. I was floating on air for 35 weeks," she says. "Of course, I was also very anxious. I never really exhaled that deep breath of relief until I held them both in my arms."

In the end, I was lucky: My rainbow-baby girl was delivered in October 2009 by a kind doctor wearing Halloween-themed scrubs. A little more than two years later, we welcomed our third daughter in the cold of January. With a busy schedule revolving around three school-age children, I rarely think about my early loss anymore. But there are days when I wonder: "Would it have been the boy we never had? What would he have been like?"

I have still not bought that mother's ring, perhaps because a part of me has yet to accept that a September sapphire will never come my way. Yet the more I share my story, the more freedom I feel and kinship I have with the many others who've suffered the loss of a pregnancy. As Dr. Cowan so wisely puts it: "These days, I'll talk to anyone and everyone who wants to know about my miscarriage, because keeping this journey private doesn't do anything for me or anyone else. I have no secrets." ❖