

Coping with pregnancy loss

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Some first thoughts

Imagining the loss of a child (when the pregnancy is desired) is an unthinkable act

Coping with it when it actually happens seems impossible

When trying to cope with the death of a fetus, the parent has to deal with how wrong and illogical the event seems

Parents don't usually outlive their children

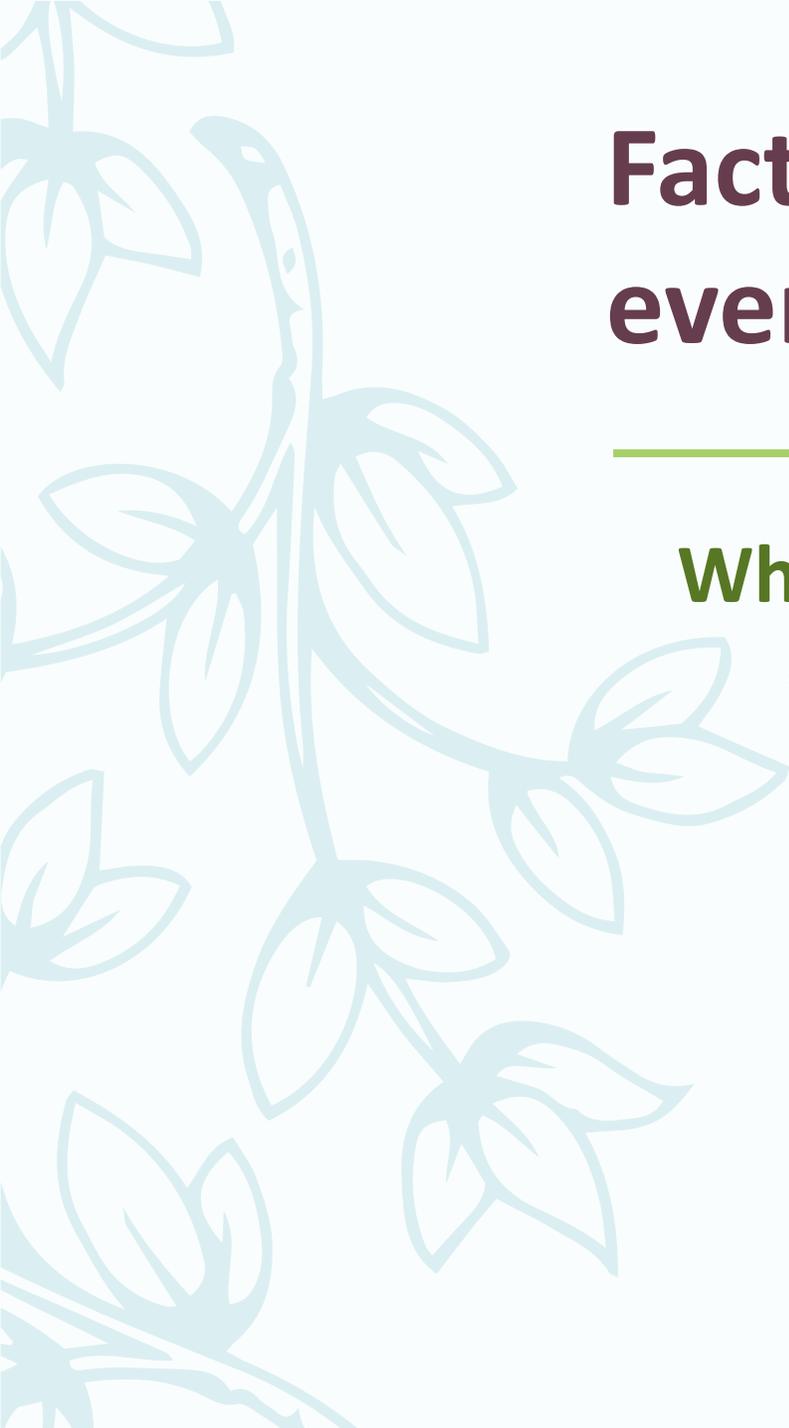
SOCIAL READJUSTMENT RATING SCALE (SRRS)

Holmes and Rahe created the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS)

It lists several events, both major & minor, that a person may experience during life

Ranks them in terms of most stress-inducing to less stress-inducing

Experience of "Death of spouse/ life partner or child" is listed as most stressful



Factors influencing the experience of events as stressful/traumatic

Whether an event will be considered stressful or traumatic usually depends on two factors:

Predictability and Control

Predictability

Predictability = to which degree the person expects/ anticipates the event to happen

Pregnant women do not usually anticipate that their pregnancy will end abruptly and without warning

When the sudden loss occurs, they're shocked

"All of us are dealing with the issue of the next pregnancy. What happened to my body that didn't go right? I go back, detail by detail, to see what I could have done differently. I want to be able to predict the future"

Control

The extent to which the person can manage/ manipulate the situation

A pregnant woman who has had a miscarriage in the past has little control over whether her next pregnancy will end with a miscarriage

Woman w/ ectopic pregnancy that needs immediate surgery has little control over what is happening

This lack of control and power creates stress

Control

"You wonder how much control you have. Dope addicts have healthy babies. Alcoholics have healthy babies. There is so much emphasis now on taking care of yourself, not drinking coffee and getting exercise. If you do all those things and your pregnancy fails, it is extremely challenging to your beliefs about doing the right thing"

The third factor



When it comes to pregnancy loss, there's a third factor that influences whether, and to what degree, the event will be experienced as traumatic:

What the pregnancy means to the parent

What the pregnancy means to the parent (subjective explanation)

To understand what it means to a woman to lose a fetus, we must look at what it means to have a fetus

What does it mean to be a mother, to give birth, to raise a baby, to create and lose life

Most pregnant women worry about the viability of the fetus in the early stages of pregnancy - understandably, these fears are especially strong in women who have had a miscarriage/ ectopic pregnancy

These women tend to resist becoming involved in the pregnancy until they are well beyond the time when the loss occurred in the previous pregnancy

What the baby represents

Part of a woman's self and part of her physical body

The pregnancy is an extension of the mother's physical appearance

The mother's body image (thoughts & feelings for body & appearance) changes during pregnancy

Even though she has to adjust to weight gain, morning sickness and fatigue → the pregnancy & change in the body are typically experienced as a welcomed & happy event

The gradual growth of her tummy represents the growth of the baby & the more the baby grows, the more the mother anticipates and prepares for the baby's birth

What the baby represents

With the loss of the pregnancy, the body image changes again - this time the thoughts & feelings that accompany the change are unpleasant

The mother may feel mutilated (particularly if the fetus is surgically removed) and betrayed by her body

May feel a great deal of emptiness (both physically & emotionally), anger, disappointment, guilt, embarrassment, confusion, insecurity

Trapped in a vulnerable, insufficient, dysfunctional body that couldn't fully carry out the task of hosting the fetus

Body image affects the mother's esteem of herself as a whole

What the baby represents

After the loss, the mother may go through a drastic change in self-esteem from strong, and competent to helpless and hopeless

These doubts may reappear stronger when repetitive pregnancy losses occur

The mother questions her identity & reason for her existence when “successfully reproducing children” is considered an integral part of a woman's role & function in her local society

The mother may wonder: "*If _____ can have children, why can't I?*"

Parents' dreams of the child's future

From the time a pregnancy is confirmed, parents, especially the mother, prepare both emotionally and practically

May think of baby names, make plans for the baby's clothes and furniture, taking time off from work, thinking of how the family will cope financially

May even talk about moving to a new house or neighborhood

Losing the pregnancy shatters these dreams

As they cope with the loss, the parents realize what will never be - having the child that was lost

The mother may have repetitive dreams of losing the baby and her other children

A great deal of thinking is devoted to wondering what the child looked like, why it had died, and what she had done to "make" it die



Receiver of the mother's love and tenderness

As the pregnancy evolves, the mother becomes more and more connected to the fetus

She caresses her tummy, she sings, talks, and reads stories to the baby

If there's conflict between the parents before or during pregnancy, the mother may become even more emotionally attached to fetus and the idea that, when born, the child will be the provider of unconditional love and support that she may be missing in her relationship with her spouse

This attachment is closely linked to (next slide)

...expectations, wishes, hopes and fantasies

The parents have about what the baby's behaviors will be, how his/her arrival will affect the family, whether he/she will enhance the parents' relationship, how the baby will carry out the parents' unfulfilled dreams for themselves

The more the mother wants the child, or the greater the ambivalence in either parent or disagreement between them regarding the pregnancy, the more significant the child is to the parents' own sense of well-being and the longer the duration of the pregnancy, the more severe will be the family stress and disruption

"It's like leaving a piece of yourself behind. Not everybody becomes famous, not everybody has a book or something people will read after they're gone. But children are a surefire way of leaving a piece of yourself behind. I won't have that now."

Source of the mother's own power

Because she was not able to control the baby's fate and did not protect the baby from death, the mother may see the baby's death as her personal failure

The grief drains the mother's psychological and physical energy

For a long time after the loss, the mother may feel she may have no strength or interest to complete ordinary tasks and make day-to-day or more complex decisions

The search for answers

Parents will, often obsessively, try to identify & understand the cause of the baby's death

May feel anger towards the medical personnel that was involved with their pregnancy

If the doctor's reaction to the loss is perceived as an acknowledgment on his/her part of making an error, then the parents will almost certainly blame the doctor

Even if the doctor is innocent, he/she may be perceived as indifferent, unskilled, and uncaring

Of course, the doctor may in fact be sympathetic and supportive towards the parent's feelings and their questions of why the loss happened

The search for answers

Woman who had one miscarriage and one stillbirth:

"I was at my wit's end wanting to have all the studies done and have all the tests and take all the medicine so I could do it right another time. My doctor told me that even though I had lost two pregnancies, I hadn't lost enough to be statistically significant."

Guilt

Emotions of guilt lead the mother to question what she did wrong during the pregnancy

She questions whether she chose the right doctor, whether she slept too little/ too much, how much she smoked, how many cocktails she had during the pregnancy, whether she exercised too much, whether she should have avoided sexual intercourse, and whether she thought something that made the baby die

As the pregnancy is reviewed and the level of personal responsibility is more realistically assessed

Guilt is gradually released and the loss fully acknowledged

Guilt

If the mother holds on to the baby with thoughts of "*If only I hadn't...*", she will have more difficulty letting go of her sadness

Guilt is even stronger if, at some point during the pregnancy, the mother did not want to have the baby, or had experienced abortion in the past

The loss may be seen as punishment for such thoughts or acts

"I spent months, even years, thinking it was the hot fudge sundae I had the night before. I had a hard time bringing it up with my doctor for fear it would really be true".

Guilt

Guilt will continue to torment the parents until they are willing to forgive themselves and others for their tragedy

They may fear that letting go of the grief is the same as letting of the child

In the absence of anything tangible to remind of the child, they use the pain as a connection

Reactions of others

Grief due to loss of a pregnancy might be viewed by the people surrounding the parents as less important or serious than the grief caused by the death of a baby that had already been born

This lack of acknowledgment and sympathy from others deprives the parents of much-needed understanding, support and affection

They may not understand how deeply the parents feel the loss and may believe that the loss can be replaced by having another child

Even people who try to comfort the parents may make comments that aren't very helpful...

Reactions of others

"You're better off because something would have been wrong with the baby, anyway. Think how hard that would have been". Or...

"If it had to happen to anybody, it's ok that it happened to you because you are really strong and you're the kind of person who can handle it. I could never handle it".

Some remarks may increase the mother's feelings of self-blame (e.g. the father may say *"I told you to quit smoking!"*)

"My mother-in-law suggested it was the diet I went on before I got pregnant."

Effects on the couple

One of the key causes of couple disharmony following the loss is the way they grieve - no two people grieve in exactly the same way

The grief process will not move at the same speed for both of them

The father's grief may be diminishing while the mother's grief remains the same or grows more acute

If the mother attempts to discuss her feelings with her husband, he may say it is no use in discussing it

A fixed distance may develop in which the wife may become increasingly involved in her thoughts about the lost baby and less involved with the family

Effects on the couple

The way the parents deal with the loss may be affected by the significance/perceived significance the existence of the pregnancy, and the loss of pregnancy, had on extended family members (e.g. future grandparents)

Gender socialization also plays a role:

When men are socialized to be strong, controlling, problem-solving, self-sufficient family protectors, this works against open expression of emotions

Losing a pregnancy is out of a father's control

He may experience anger, guilt, and personal failure, particularly if he can not help his wife cope with the grief

Effects on the couple

When he tries to be in control of his emotions or doesn't want to talk about the loss, the mother may view him as withdrawn and not caring

He may look for ways to distract himself via energy-consuming activity (e.g. work) or try to change the way he thinks about the loss (*"Better lose the fetus than the mother, we can have another baby"*)

It would be more difficult for him to talk to a friend about his feelings

"Men tend to grieve on their own, to cry alone when the house is empty. I suspect many men feel much worse about miscarriage and death than they ever tell".

Effects on the couple

Unless each parent is quite attuned to the other, this difference in grieving will be interpreted as another sign of either overemotional reacting or not caring enough and will lead to conflict

Sexual expression between the couple, which helped bring them together in the past, now reminds them of how the lost pregnancy was initiated and is impeded by the inability to trust or feel close after the loss

The mother may feel too emotionally empty, preoccupied or not yet physically recuperated

She may want to participate but thinks it is morally unacceptable

She may want to wait until she feels sex is appropriate

Effects on the family

The impact of pregnancy loss can be harder if it occurs before a mutual relationship system is established within the family

The baby's significance to the family can be understood in terms of the functional role in the family (e.g. buffer between the parents), and the degree of emotional dependence of the family on the individual

After the pregnancy loss, denial of the emotional dependence leads to the dependence not being dealt with directly

The family may begin experiencing difficulties (e.g. conflicts) that will usually be viewed as unrelated to the loss

Existing children can be very perceptive of the mother's distress and may wonder where their prospective sibling is

Effects on the family

If they don't know why the mother is upset, existing children could become worried and confused and may even fantasize that the baby was lost because of something they did

The parent may find her/himself answering children's questions over and over again

A child may be conceived to take the place of the dead child or the dead child's place is held open by the family, creating further complication for the existing siblings

Apart from giving birth to children, mothers have to fill other roles

While grieving for the pregnancy and in need for support, she is having difficulty dealing with her role of nurturing and communicating with her existing children and with communicating with her spouse

Coping

The joy of having another child can not replace the grief over the loss of the pregnancy

With the sudden loss, there is no time for farewells. There is no anticipatory mourning.

In coping with the grief, parents may create a special journal/album where they can write their thoughts about the pregnancy and the loss along with the baby's name, any sonogram or ultrasound pictures, photos, mementos, hand prints/ foot prints

This helps make the baby real, it gives him/her an identity & existence

Healing comes from remembering

Coping

Writing and poetry can be used as an outlet for expressing thoughts and feelings and can help put things in perspective

"After losing my baby at five-months pregnant, it has been so hard for me to move forward. I have all of the cards that I received, flowers that I kept, and all of the memories that I never ever want to fade. Most importantly, I have my baby's ultrasound picture that I will forever cherish and that I know I am so lucky to have. Having an album/ journal contains the tangible evidence of my baby's life. And while I may not be able to hold my baby in my arms, it was my baby, it was real and I always want it to be close to me. "

Coping

By actively breaking the silence surrounding the death and talking to relatives and friends, the parent lets others know that it's Ok to talk about the baby, even the longing and concerns occupying his/her thoughts

Finding a supportive person that is accessible and available, and even has had similar experiences of pregnancy loss, can help

The mother may even need support from someone that can assume some household tasks, such as child care and house cleaning, while she has time to herself to grieve

Finding support and understanding through a support group may also be a possibility

Coping

Feelings of helplessness will diminish as the parent begins to re-establish a healthy degree of control over domestic tasks, work activities, and recreational choices

Feelings may resurface when seeing other pregnant women and babies or at key dates, such as the day the pregnancy was clinically confirmed, the day the loss occurred, the day the baby was due, the birthday of one of the family's children, family celebrations

If the parents are having difficulty overcoming the loss and are becoming depressed, professional counseling can be of help

For couples

Parents should set aside time to share and attentively listen to each other's thoughts and feelings

At the same time, there may be need for solitary time, during which rest & reflection can take place

If both partners want to engage in intimacy, the need for physical contact should not be denied

Intimacy can affirm love, closeness and the couple's ability to reciprocate through gestures, caresses and words

Experiencing pleasure is not the same thing as renouncing the lost baby

If the parent is enjoying her/himself, it does not mean she/he is forgetting the loss

When choosing to have another baby

Childbearing capabilities are influenced by the mother's emotional state. The mother should consider if she is experiencing frequent fluctuations of her emotions (e.g. from pleasure to deep sadness)

Physical condition determines the ease of birth and extent of withstanding demands on energy and endurance

The loss of the baby needs to have been incorporated into your life

When the loss of the child remains as a void to be filled, the new baby will be destined to fill that void

Parents must realize and accept that the new baby will never be able to be or substitute the lost baby

Meaning-making

The parent may never find the reason for the baby's loss, but meaning may emerge from the loss

"Nobody knows what they can handle until they have to. If someone told me that my child was going to die, and I was going to survive it, I would have said, "You're absolutely crazy. I could never handle that"."

"In some ways you never stop mourning the loss, you find a place for it, you integrate it."