Pregnancy Loss: Working with the Grieving Patient

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A woman who has suffered a pregnancy loss has just entered a process of grief.
A General Definition:

The United States National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) defines fetal death as the spontaneous intrauterine death of a fetus at any time during pregnancy.
Rough Statistics

It is estimated that in the United States, about 20 to 25 percent of ALL pregnancies end up in losses. This includes:

- Molar pregnancies
- Ectopic pregnancies
- Miscarriages
- Stillbirths
The Concepts of Loss, Grief, and Bereavement
Loss, Grief and Bereavement

**Loss** - is the fact or process of losing something or someone.

**Grief** – refers to the set of emotional, cognitive, physical and behavioral/social responses to a loss.

**Mourning** - Is the set of outward manifestations of grief.

*Funerals, rituals, cultural/religious beliefs and practices.*

**Bereavement** - Is used to describe the entire process of grieving and mourning.
A Few Words On Grief

Grief is a normal reaction after a loss

- It is a natural, non-pathological phenomenon
- It is a healthy expression of the emotions
- It is a necessary step for healing

It is a universal human experience

- It occurs across cultures, gender, age, socioeconomic status, etc.
A Few Words On Grief (cont’d)

It is a very personal and highly individual experience

*Each person grieves differently based on factors such as personality, coping style/strategies, religious beliefs, support system at time of loss, and/or level of attachment to their loved one.*
Grief is also socially and culturally influenced

*People approach and react to death according to their culture’s interpretations of death and what happens after death*

*Private/quiet crying vs. public demonstrations of grief*

*Funerals, rituals, and ways to remember the dead are also culturally and socially defined*

*It is a process, therefore it takes time
  Cannot be rushed*
Symptoms of Grief After a Pregnancy Loss

EMOTIONAL:
- Sadness
- Emotional Numbness
- Anger
- Guilt
- Fear
- Anxiety
- Loneliness
- Helplessness
- Hopelessness
Symptoms of Grief After a Pregnancy Loss (cont’d)

COGNITIVE:

- Shock and disbelief
- Confusion
- Inability to concentrate
- Preoccupation
- Self Doubt
- Auditory Hallucinations
Symptoms of Grief After a Pregnancy Loss (cont’d)

**PHYSICAL:**
- Lack of energy
- Lower immunity
- Oversensitivity to noise/light
- Changes in appetite
- Sleep disturbances
- Physical aches or exacerbation of illnesses
Symptoms of Grief After a Pregnancy Loss (cont’d)

**BEHAVIORAL / SOCIAL:**
- Refusal to see/hold her baby’s remains
- Absentmindedness
- Irritability
- Social withdrawal
The 5 Stages of Grief
The Kübler-Ross Theory

Acceptance

Denial

Five Step Grieving Process

Depression

Anger

Bargaining
Newer Versions

**STAGES OF GRIEF**

- Loss-Hurt
  - Shock
  - Numbness
  - Denial
  - Emotional Outbursts
  - Anger
  - Fear
  - Searchings
  - Disorganization
  - Panic
  - Loneliness
  - Guilt

- Loss Adjustment
  - Helping Others
  - Affirmation
  - Hope
  - New Patterns
  - New Strengths
  - New Relationships
  - "Re-Entry" Troubles
  - Depression
  - Isolation
The Patient’s Experience

My experience

Loss-Hurt
Shock
Numbness
Denial
Emotional Outbursts
Anger
Fear
Searchings
Disorganization
Panic
Loneliness
Guilt
Isolation
Loss Adjustment
Helping Others
Affirmation
Hope
New Patterns
New Strengths
New Relationships
“Re-Entry” Troubles
Depression
What Can I Do to Help?

Be Aware Of:

• **Word choice** – Refer to the patient’s baby as “your baby.” Avoid using the terms fetus, specimen, it, or product of conception when talking to her.

• **Body Language** - Facial expression, a smile goes a long way and connects you to the patient.

• **Speech** – Tone of voice, volume, speech rate.

• **Behavior** – Respect your patient’s space and privacy, be gentle and patient.

• **Listen and validate**

• **Show genuine empathy and kindness** – These are universal features and need no words for interpretation.
What and What Not to Tell

Inappropriate
• I know exactly how you feel
• Everything happens for a reason
• He/she is in a better place
• God will give you more children or at least you have other kids.
• You’ll feel better soon
• Life goes on

Appropriate
• I am sorry for your loss
• I can only imagine how you feel at this time
• This baby must have been very special for you
• I am here to help in any way I can
• Is there anything I can do for you at this time?
Resources

H A N D
Houston’s Aid in Neonatal Death
P.O. Box 19823
Houston, TX. 77224-9823
(832) 752-1919
info@hand.net

Bo’s Place
10050 Buffalo Speedway
Houston, TX. 77054
(713) 942-8339
info@bosplace.org
REFERENCES