

# & PREGNANCY INFANT LOSS

*a guide to coping with loss*

Image created by Melissa T.



women's  
health clinic

## Acknowledgements:

Pregnancy and infant loss can be an upsetting event. There is also a quiet strength within those who experience this loss. They have made choices about a pregnancy and birth with kindness, compassion, and a determination for what is right for themselves and their family.

The art in this booklet was created with love and shared with courage by women we were fortunate to meet in some of the most unfortunate of circumstances. Their strength reminds us of the strengths we each carry and the power we have when our voices come together.

We would like to thank Elder Mae Louise Campbell, Ishkiday-Kiday-Kwe, for sharing her teachings with us. Her wisdom about the strength of women and the feminine within Indigenous cultures reminds us that we are strong and our bodies are sacred. Mother Earth provides us with strength to carry life and after its loss, does not abandon us in our grief. Our caring community grieves with us. She encourages us to connect to Spirit, and to others to express our grief, to sing and do ceremony, and to share our stories.

The Bear represents the courage to face life with strength, to defend both what you believe in and what is right for you.

The Eagle represents the pure essence of love, to be at peace with yourself and the balance of life.

Create a ceremony for yourself to share words of love for our loss, to write our true feelings, and then burn them in a smudge bowl to release them.

A special thank you to all the babies lost who aren't often talked about, but live on in the hearts of many. Because of them, we are who we are meant to be.

Funding provided in part by the Manitoba Government.

Image created by Ange K.  
in memory of Paige



women's  
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**A nurse told me 'I don't know exactly how you are feeling but I can imagine and I'm right here with you'. I'll never forget someone acknowledging me and telling me they were right there with me.**

**- Lisa**

The experience of losing an infant or pregnancy brings many different emotions. Some people may carry the impact of this loss for the rest of their lives and yet it can be difficult to speak about openly. Sometimes not having support to move through the emotions can leave us feeling alone.

We created this booklet to talk about the range of emotions you may feel and to let you know you are not alone. The emotions you feel right now may be mixed and hard to understand. With time, there will be days when you may feel like you are accepting your loss and moving forward. Some days you may wake up and feel like the grief has hit you all over again. Whatever you are feeling is okay. There is no set amount of time for grieving. Allow yourself the time you need.

We hope this booklet helps you to process your feelings and to reflect on your personal experience.

# INFANT LOSS

## *What is infant loss?*

Neonatal loss is the medical term for the loss of a pregnancy after 20 weeks gestation or the death of an infant up to 28 days after birth. We recognize this is not how people commonly refer to this experience so in this booklet we use the term infant loss. Infant loss happens in 1 of every 200 pregnancies.

## *What causes infant loss?*

Infant loss is not caused by the actions of the pregnant person. Here are some reasons why it happens:

- There are problems with the placenta. This can also be risky for the pregnant person.
- The infant has chromosomal abnormalities.
- When fetal growth is restricted, health problems in pregnancy prevent the infant from growing to the expected size.
- There is a serious infection.

Your health care provider will try to help you understand what has happened. A public health nurse may phone or visit you to provide support.

## *What happens to my body after infant loss?*

- You may have cramps and bleeding for up to six weeks as your uterus returns to former size. The blood flow should not be heavy. Seek medical attention if the bleeding is bright red or heavy.
- Your breasts may become engorged. Hot or cold compresses or warm showers may provide comfort. Your health care provider or public health nurse can advise you on how best to stop lactation. Medication may help.
- Your health care provider may advise that you wait six weeks before having sexual intercourse, or using tampons or menstrual cups.
- Hormone changes may cause sweating and breast tenderness.
- You may experience mood changes from hormone changes as well as grief. It's important to be aware that postpartum emotional adjustments may also affect how you are feeling.

If you have any concerns, contact your health care provider or call Health Links at 204-788-8200 or toll-free 1-888-315-9257.



### *Love Through Loss*

Images created by Mellissa S. in memory of Layla

# PREGNANCY LOSS

## *What is pregnancy loss?*

When a pregnancy ends on its own before 20 weeks gestation, it is called a miscarriage or a pregnancy loss. A fetus cannot live on its own outside the uterus that early in pregnancy. The medical term for pregnancy loss is spontaneous abortion.

## *What causes pregnancy loss?*

Pregnancy loss is common; 2 in every 10 pregnancies will end in miscarriage. Twenty-five percent of pregnant people experience a pregnancy loss. It is most likely to happen in early pregnancy; 8 out of 10 miscarriages happen within the first three months.

When a pregnancy ends prematurely, it's natural to wonder why. Some people wonder if they could have done something to prevent it. It can help to know that a pregnancy loss isn't usually caused by something they did. Having sex, physical activity, a mild fall, and most medications do not cause miscarriage.

It can be difficult for health care providers to know exactly why a miscarriage happened. Here are some possible reasons:

- Sometimes a fetus has a chromosome that causes abnormal development. This happens by chance when a fertilized egg divides and grows. This causes at least half of miscarriages. It usually isn't a sign of a condition that will cause problems in future pregnancies.
- The risk of miscarriage increases with age.

- There is a correlation between miscarriage and some severe chronic illnesses like poorly controlled diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, and lupus.
- Severe trauma or very serious infection.
- Abnormalities in the uterus, like scar tissue or uterine fibroids, can contribute to late miscarriages (after three months).
- People who have had two or more miscarriages in a row are at a greater risk for future pregnancy losses.

Your health care provider will try to help you understand what has happened. You can also contact a public health nurse for telephone support or arrange a home visit.

*What can I expect physically after a miscarriage?*

Experiences vary, but these are common after a miscarriage:

- cramps
- spotting or bleeding
- sore or tender breasts
- mood changes

If you have had three or more miscarriages in a row, and want to get pregnant again, your health care provider may suggest tests for hormonal imbalances, genetic disorders, or other conditions. These tests may reveal a problem that can be treated to help you have a healthy pregnancy in the future.



# PREGNANCY TERMINATION

We know that choosing to end a pregnancy for any reason is done with great thought, consideration, love, and compassion. Grief can be a normal response to your choice to end a pregnancy. You may feel the range of feelings we describe in this booklet and that is normal.

## *What is an abortion?*

Abortion is a safe and legal medical procedure in Canada to end a pregnancy, and part of the spectrum of reproductive health care. An abortion is sometimes required when a pregnancy loss has occurred or is no longer viable.

## *What can I expect physically after an abortion?*

If you have had an abortion before 20 weeks gestation, your body will recover as it would after a miscarriage. You can find more information on physical symptoms you may be experiencing on page 7.

For more information on caring for yourself after an abortion, please visit our website at [www.womenshealthclinic.org](http://www.womenshealthclinic.org).

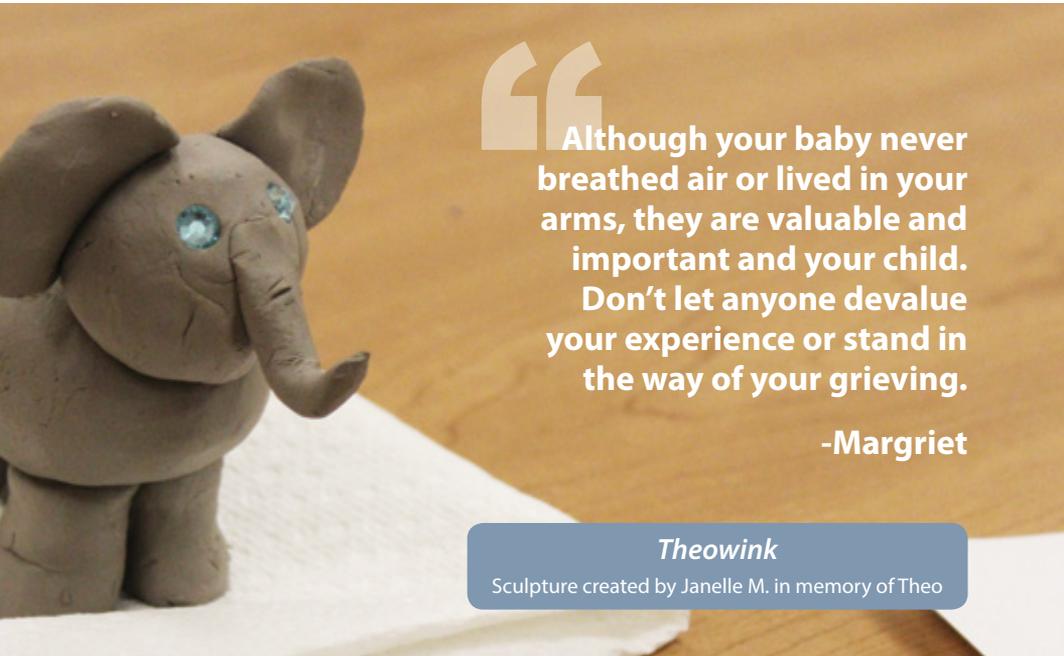
If you have had an abortion after 20 weeks gestation, your body will recover in much the same way as it would after a full-term pregnancy. There are many reasons for terminating a pregnancy after 20 weeks including fetal abnormalities. You can find more information on the physical symptoms you may experience under infant loss on page 5.

# YOUR FEELINGS

*What emotions can I expect after a pregnancy or infant loss?*

Losing anyone can be very difficult. Pregnancy and infant loss can sometimes create emotions that can be intense and overwhelming. You may have several feelings all at the same time. They may come and go in waves. All of them are normal. Your feelings may include:

- disappointment
- anger
- sadness
- despair
- shock
- guilt
- fear
- anxiety
- restlessness
- racing thoughts
- loneliness
- pain
- confusion
- grief
- relief



**Although your baby never breathed air or lived in your arms, they are valuable and important and your child. Don't let anyone devalue your experience or stand in the way of your grieving.**

**-Margriet**

*Theowink*

Sculpture created by Janelle M. in memory of Theo

*Why do I feel like it's my fault?*

We often hear that everything happens for a reason. You may feel that your body has failed you or you have failed this infant. Remember that most times, we will never know the reasons for a loss. Learning that we don't have control over everything that happens in our bodies teaches us to be compassionate with ourselves. Punishing yourself with feelings of guilt doesn't change what has happened and only makes you reluctant to enjoy life. Practicing kindness and forgiveness are ways to learn and grow from this experience.

  
**I've struggled through guilt, wondering what I could have done differently.**  
**- Margriet**

*Why do I feel so alone?*

Navigating loss isn't an easy journey. People who have experienced it are not generally encouraged to openly talk about their loss. For some, grief includes grieving the loss of the potential of a person. As the person carrying the pregnancy, you share a unique relationship with your infant unlike anyone else.

People may not know how to process your grief or understand it because they aren't invested in the potential of this life in the same way. It's also common for people to think that depth and length of grief is related to the length of the life of the person who has passed. This isn't always true. You will grieve as long as you need to.

### *Why do I feel that I'm not understood?*

People aren't always sure how to best respond to this life event. Some find it difficult to respond to open expressions of sadness, anxiety or grief. Some may interpret active grief - crying, sobbing, or openly expressing pain - as signs of struggling to cope.

Some people may expect you to react in a certain way and when you react in other ways they don't expect, they're not sure how to deal with your emotions. Personal discomfort may cause some people to avoid, dismiss, or diminish your expressions of grief.

It's important for you to remember that strength and coping are expressed in many different ways and openly expressing pain is just one of them. Do what feels best for you.

### *What if I don't feel anything?*

Some people may feel numb. This is a normal response. Whatever your feelings are, allow yourself to feel the way you do. Try not to judge your feelings or yourself for having them.

Some people may even feel a sense of relief. This could have been a very traumatic pregnancy. For some, pregnancy symptoms can also be very stressful. It can be a relief when they stop.

Sometimes we may not feel sure about the idea of being a parent. Sometimes there are so many difficult decisions to make about a pregnancy, it can be a relief when it ends and not have to make a further decision about it. The most important thing is not to judge yourself for the feelings you have, whatever they may be.

## *How long will I feel this way?*

A pregnancy loss or infant loss may always be a part of your life. How long it takes to process the experience and the emotions is different for everyone. Grieving can last days, weeks, months, or years. Accept that there will be milestones that bring you back to this day. It's normal that they would remind you of your loss. Painful feelings you thought were behind you may return. Grieving your loss should not be minimized.

## *Are there physical symptoms of grief?*

Grief can be expressed in our bodies as well as in our minds and hearts. Some people experience:

- fatigue
- rapid heartbeat
- deep sighing or yawning
- aching body
- headaches
- sleeping more than usual
- difficulty sleeping
- insomnia
- nausea or lack of appetite
- increased appetite
- shaking
- laughing
- crying
- yelling



**The hardest part for me was the loneliness that follows. Having a baby with you for months who kicks you all day and then nothing is a hard thing to get over.**

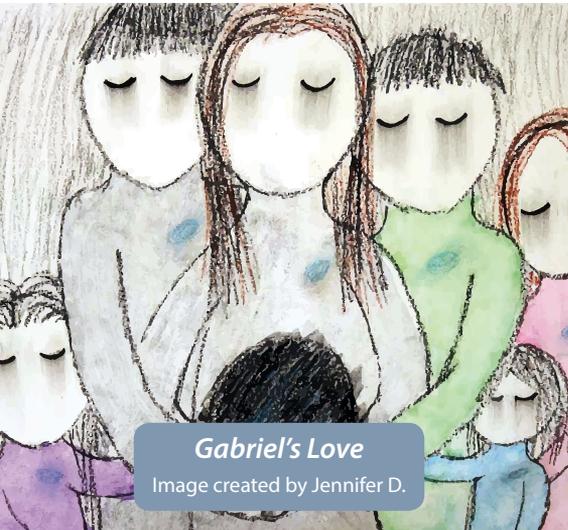
**- Rhea**

# FAMILIES, FRIENDS AND COMMUNITY

*Why do my partner and family not understand how I'm feeling?*

A loss of an infant or an anticipated pregnancy can affect everyone around you. Try to understand that their feelings may be complex too. They may have some of the same feelings as you but unable to express them in the same way as you, or at all. They may be facing their own pregnancy or infant loss where they were encouraged to “just move on” and not discuss it.

Personal discomfort may cause some people to avoid, dismiss, or diminish your expressions of grief. It's important to acknowledge the grief everyone may be feeling and how difficult it can be to process what's happened. Trying to communicate your feelings and support for each other may help each of you cope.



*Gabriel's Love*

Image created by Jennifer D.

“  
**Don't let yourself shut down and push people away. Lean into your support system, don't pull back. They won't understand but they will listen. Also your partner is a life raft - hold each other as much as possible.**

**- Rhea**

## *How do I talk to children about the loss?*

Children need help to understand what has happened. They will need to be told directly that the pregnancy has ended or that the infant has died. They will need to be reassured that they are loved, and that they will be part of remembering and honouring the loss.

Children may also feel sadness, anger, disappointment, confusion and other strong emotions that you are feeling. Answer their questions as honestly as you can. Reassure them the loss was not their fault or anyone else's fault, and that the love that you share is helping you in these difficult moments.

It can be difficult to parent while grieving. If possible, invite other trusted adults to show love and help care for the children

## *What do I say when others ask how they can help?*

People who are grieving need different kinds of support at different times. You may need to encourage people close to you to:

- Follow your lead. Let them know it's okay to ask you what you may need from them.
- Acknowledge what has happened and your feelings about it.
- Offer hugs and closeness.
- Remember it's okay to show emotion and share your grief.
- Reassure you it was not your fault.
- Be present and patient with you.
- Offer practical support. They can bring food, tissues or flowers, make tea or coffee, help with other responsibilities like chores, caring for other children, or pet care.
- Remember the pregnancy or infant who was lost.
- Take care of themselves as well.

# LIVING WITH AND HONOURING THE LOSS

Often there is support immediately after the loss, but it doesn't seem to last as long as you need it to. Family and friends seem to go on with their lives and you may feel pressure from the people around you to move on and let go. This is not always possible. Your life is changed by what has touched your heart. It can help to reframe your loss as a story of love that can be supported and grown through helpful and meaningful conversations with others.

Give yourself permission to have the feelings you have. Finding some compassion for yourself, just as you would for a friend or loved one in a similar situation, is a powerful way to support yourself. There are ways of talking with people that include keeping stories of loved ones who have passed close. Death may end a life or potential life, but not our relationship to them.



**Take help when it is offered and know that grief/sadness and joy/happiness are not mutually exclusive.**

**Let yourself laugh if you feel like it. It doesn't lessen your deep sadness or longing for your baby.**

**- Margriet**

Image created by Ange K. in memory of Paige

It's important to take care of all aspects of who you are.

Some things you can do:

### *Body*

- Allow others to take care of you.
- Rest, eat and drink plenty of fluids.
- When you feel ready, move your body. *Examples: walking, cycling, yoga.*

### *Heart*

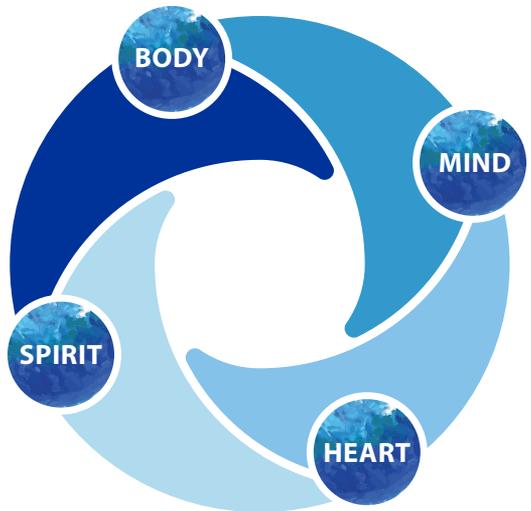
- Don't judge your feelings.
- Be kind to yourself.
- Create memories.
- Connect to loved ones and share.
- Connect with others who have experienced a pregnancy or infant loss.

### *Spirit*

- Attend a ceremony.
- Practice self-compassion and forgiveness.
- Attend a sweat lodge.
- Pray.
- Meditate.

### *Mind*

- Write about your experience.
- Talk to someone you trust about your feelings.



Remembering your infant can gradually help you to come to terms with your loss.

Some ways people keep memories alive:

- using their infant's name
- celebrating birthdays
- keeping physical mementos like photographs, clothes and items chosen for their infant, or journal entries
- wearing a reminder like jewellery with the infant's name or birthstone
- getting a tattoo

Other ways of honouring may include:

- having a gathering
- a funeral
- a ceremony
- having a plaque or monument made
- making a donation to charity in the infant's name
- placing a special item in your home
- planting a tree



The bear represents  
**COURAGE**



The eagle represents  
**LOVE**



Create a personal  
ceremony for  
**YOURSELF**

**I learned that I needed to take care of myself first - to grieve as much as I needed, and not to let others dictate how long it should take.**

**-Anonymous**

*What about future pregnancies?*

Ask your health care provider for advice about getting pregnant in the future. You might want to know when to try again or how to prevent pregnancy until you are ready for one. They can give you advice and help you plan for your next pregnancy.

*How will I manage seeing people who are pregnant or with babies?*

After an infant loss, it is understandable that you might be more sensitive to things related to pregnancy and infancy. Being near pregnant people or young babies, seeing baby items, receiving baby announcements, packing up maternity clothes, arriving at the due date, anniversaries of the loss, and being intimate again all can be challenging. These reminders of the loss can bring another wave of grief or other intense feelings. This is normal. Remember to be kind to yourself and find joy in other aspects of your life to help you.

“

**There's nothing anyone can say that will make the pain go away but know that there is a community of women holding you up and supporting you.**

**- Anonymous**

# COMMUNITY RESOURCES

If you find yourself thinking a lot about your loss, or feel like you don't have anyone you can talk to, seeing a counsellor may help. Please call us at 204- 947-2422, ext. 204 if you want to find a counsellor or need help finding other services.

Your public health nurse may contact you soon after your pregnancy or infant loss. They can help you find services in your area and provide care for your recovery. To find a public health nurse in your region, call 204-788-6666 or visit the Province of Manitoba website: [www.gov.mb.ca/health/publichealth/offices](http://www.gov.mb.ca/health/publichealth/offices).

If you have any concerns about how you are feeling, contact your health care provider or Health Links at 204-788-8200 or toll-free at 1-888-315-9257.

## URGENT HELP

Community resources available for you:

### **Klinik Crisis Line**

204-786-8686 or 1-888-322-3019 | TTY 204-784-4097

### **Manitoba Suicide Prevention Line**

1-877-435-7170 (1-877-HELP170)

### **Adult Mobile Crisis Service**

204-940-1781

**Go in-person to:** Crisis Response Centre 817 Bannatyne Ave., Winnipeg

**Online:** To search for services near you go to [mb.211.ca](http://mb.211.ca)



The art in this booklet was created with love and shared with courage by women we were fortunate to meet in some of the most unfortunate of circumstances.

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