



Pregnancy and infant loss can affect people in many different ways. People who have lived through this experience are often required to make difficult choices about a pregnancy or birth. They've assessed their circumstances and listened to themselves in order to determine what is right for themselves and their family.

The experience of losing an infant or pregnancy can bring many different emotions. These experiences can often be surrounded by silence or isolation. Having support can provide a person with feeling acknowledged, validated, and understood. Not having support can result in a person feeling alone, misunderstood, or judged.

Loss can bring up a range of emotions. Although your experience is unique, you can depend on not being alone in any of the thoughts or feelings that are coming up for you. 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. Other days you may feel ambivalent about it. Whatever you are feeling is okay. There is no set amount of time for grieving. Allow yourself the time you need.

We want to acknowledge that the definitions / information in this document are just one way of understanding what pregnancy and infant loss is. There are many other cultural perspectives and understandings of pregnancy and infant loss, that sometimes include cultural protocols for when this kind of loss happens. Connecting to our own cultural understandings, teachings and protocols can be helpful for some people.

We hope this document will help you to process your feelings and to reflect on your personal experience.

## *Your Feelings*

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

Loss of any kind can be very difficult. Pregnancy and infant loss can sometimes create emotions that can be distressing. You may have several feelings all at the same time. They may come and go in waves. Emotions are safe and important. Allowing yourself to experience and express your feelings will help you to process through your experience. Your feelings may include:

- » sadness
- » despair
- » disappointment
- » anger
- » shock
- » guilt
- » fear
- » loneliness
- » pain
- » confusion
- » ambivalence
- » longing
- » relief
- » love

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

Pregnant people face a lot of judgment in our society, and are sometimes taught through societal messaging to blame themselves if loss happens. It is not your fault. Remember that most times, we may not know the reasons for a loss. We do not have control over everything that happens in our bodies. Punishing yourself with criticism cannot change what happened. Practicing self-compassion, reaching out and connecting with non-judgmental people or groups, and building understanding for yourself, can help people move through feelings of self-blame towards self-kindness and healing.

### **Why do I feel so alone?**

Navigating loss can be difficult. People who have experienced it are not generally encouraged to openly talk about their loss. People may not understand your experience of what happened because it is unique to you. It is shaped by your hopes and expectations of the pregnancy, the circumstances and people you are surrounded by, and your beliefs and values.

### **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, relief or grief. Some may interpret active grief - crying, sobbing, or openly expressing pain - as signs of struggling to cope, but it is not. These are healthy ways of processing.

Some people may expect you to react in a certain way, and if you react in another way, they may not be sure what to do. Personal discomfort may cause some people to avoid, dismiss, or diminish your expressions. You are encouraged to find spaces and company that let you do what feels best for you.

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

Some people may feel numb or ambivalent. This is a very human 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. Try not to judge yourself for the feelings you have, whatever they may be.

### **What if I feel like I am stuck in grief?**

Grief is often approached (intentionally or not) as though it is a kind of depression, as though it is something that requires an intervention or treatment of some kind. Grief, however, is an instinctive response to loss. Although some of the expressions of grief might look like depression, treating it as such can unintentionally leave people with the impression

something is wrong with them or that they are not 'handling' something well. Giving yourself patience, and the chance to fully experience all feelings as they come in and out, allow you the space to make sense of your loss.

Many books on grief provide some kind of model to be followed. Ideas related to 'stages of grief,' or to notions of 'moving on' and 'letting go' or 'acceptance' can imply that staying engaged with the relationship we have lost – in this case staying connected to the pregnancy or infant, is treated as if it were unhealthy in some way.

Grief is a normal human response, and it is not linear. Grief often comes in circles, different layers of it coming up over time.

It makes sense that people often want to remain connected to experiences, relationships, or dreams they have lost. Creating time and space where these connections can be honoured, can allow you to grow around your experience.

## *Family and Friends*

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

A loss of an infant or ending of a pregnancy can affect others around you. 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 feelings. It's important to acknowledge what 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.

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

Children need help to understand what has happened. They will need to be told gently that the pregnancy has ended. They may require additional attention and comfort during this time.

Children may also feel sadness, anger, disappointment, confusion, relief, ambivalence, 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 feelings you are both experiencing are okay: they are a part of being human. It can be difficult to parent if you are grieving. If possible, invite other trusted adults to show love and help care for the children.

## **How can others help?**

You may need different kinds of support at different times.

Ideally, the people in your life need to create a welcoming space for you, one that allows for all potential emotions to exist.

Others can help by:

- » Following your lead
- » Allowing your experience to be the focus when you need it to be
- » Being with you in your feelings without trying to “fix” them
- » Acknowledging what has happened and your feelings about it
- » Being present and patient with you
- » Offering practical support: They can bring food, help with other responsibilities like chores, help with caring for any dependents in your life, do things with you that you enjoy
- » Taking care of themselves as well

## ***Living with and honoring the loss***

Often there is support immediately after the loss, but it may not seem to last as long as you need it to. Family and friends may 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. You may feel your life has changed. It can be helpful to think about what your relationship is with what is lost, what this loss meant to you, and what it means to live now. This process can be supported 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.

## ***Connection and community care***

Connection and reaching out to community and supports is a key way that human beings get through hard times. You are not alone, and we all need care and support from those around us at the best of times, and even more so when we are grieving or struggling.

Some people might find support and connection from their family, chosen family or friends. Others find connection through counseling, peer support groups, and therapy groups helpful. People may also find healing in connecting to their spirit and the land through prayer, ritual or ceremonies. For some people connecting to spirit might be about connecting to nature, or connecting to Indigenous ceremony, community or healing practices if you are Indigenous (such as sweatlodge, chibi ceremonies, a medicine person / knowledge keeper, Sundance, cedar bath ceremony, sharing circles, using medicines, etc.). For others, it might be about connecting to religion or culture. Connection might also be about going to community events, getting involved in activities that you enjoy, or volunteering somewhere.

## *Dragonfly teachings*

**Offered by Indigenous Elder and Director of Leadership Louise McKay**

“The dragonfly is born on the water as a bug (a nymph) and lives the first part of its life under water. As the nymph matures it begins to look up longingly through the water and the sky above. Somehow it knows that its time has come to give in to the urge to climb up the lily pad stalk. Once the nymph climbs up, emerges from the water and learns to breathe air, it can never return to live in the water. Almost immediately their body will release two beautiful pairs of wings which will allow it to fly. Dragonfly symbolizes change, transformation, adaptability, and self-realization.”

– Louise McKay

Like the dragonfly, when we experience change or grief, a transformation happens. We don't simply “get over” grief; we build around our grief. We build a bridge between who we were before and after by working through and acknowledging what has happened, building connections and support.



Dragonfly image by Jackie Traverse

## ***Language around Pregnancy and Infant Loss:***

### **Neonatal Loss**

#### **What is neonatal 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. Neonatal loss happens in 1 of every 200 pregnancies. We recognize this is not how people commonly refer to this experience so in this document we will use the terms neonatal loss and infant loss, interchangeably.

What causes neonatal loss?

Neonatal 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.
- » There is a serious infection.
- » When fetal growth is restricted, health problems in pregnancy prevent the infant from growing to the expected size.
- » Often neonatal loss can occur without any medical explanation offered.

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 if requested by the pregnant person.

#### **What happens to my body after neonatal 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.

### **Miscarriage / Spontaneous Abortion**

When a pregnancy ends on its own before 20 weeks gestation, it is called a miscarriage. The medical term for miscarriage is spontaneous abortion. This language is used from a feminist / pro-choice perspective instead of miscarriage because the word miscarriage is seen as blaming the person or placing a deficit on the person who was pregnant. We know that pregnancy loss is common and can happen for lots of different reasons.

A fetus cannot live on its own outside the uterus early in pregnancy. Not all people who experience a pregnancy ending through miscarriage/spontaneous abortion as a loss, although some do. There is no right or wrong way to feel.

Spontaneous abortion is common: one in every five pregnancies will end this way. It is most likely to happen in early pregnancy; four out of five 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 a spontaneous abortion.

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.
- » Severe trauma or very serious infection.
- » People who have had two or more miscarriages in a row can be 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/spontaneous abortion?**

Experiences vary, but these are common after a miscarriage:

- » Cramps
- » Spotting or bleeding
- » Sore or tender breasts
- » Mood changes

## **Abortion**

### **What is 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.

We know that being able to make informed choices about our bodies is important. If a pregnant person chooses to have an abortion, relief, without a sense of loss, is a common response. However, you may also feel the range of feelings we describe in this document. Again, there is no right or wrong way to feel.

### **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. 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. Physical symptoms you may experience after an abortion at this time would be similar to what is described as symptoms under a neonatal loss.

## **Resources**

If you need immediate support, please call:

- » **Mobile Crisis Service**  
204-940-1781
- » **Community Intake**  
204-788-8330
- » **Klinik Crisis Line**  
204-786-8686 or 1-888-322-3019  
TTY 204-784-4097
- » **Manitoba Suicide Prevention & Support Line**  
1-877-435-7170 (1-877-HELP170)
- » **Family Peer Support**  
204-940-2376
- » **First Nations and Inuit Hope and Wellness Help Line**  
1-855-242-3310
- » **Pregnancy and Infant Loss Support Line (through the Pregnancy and Infant Loss Support Centre – Calgary)**  
Text support 1-888-910-1551  
Hours: 9 a.m. – 11 p.m. (Mountain Time) seven days a week