Permission to Grieve

Finding Healing and Hope After Miscarriage

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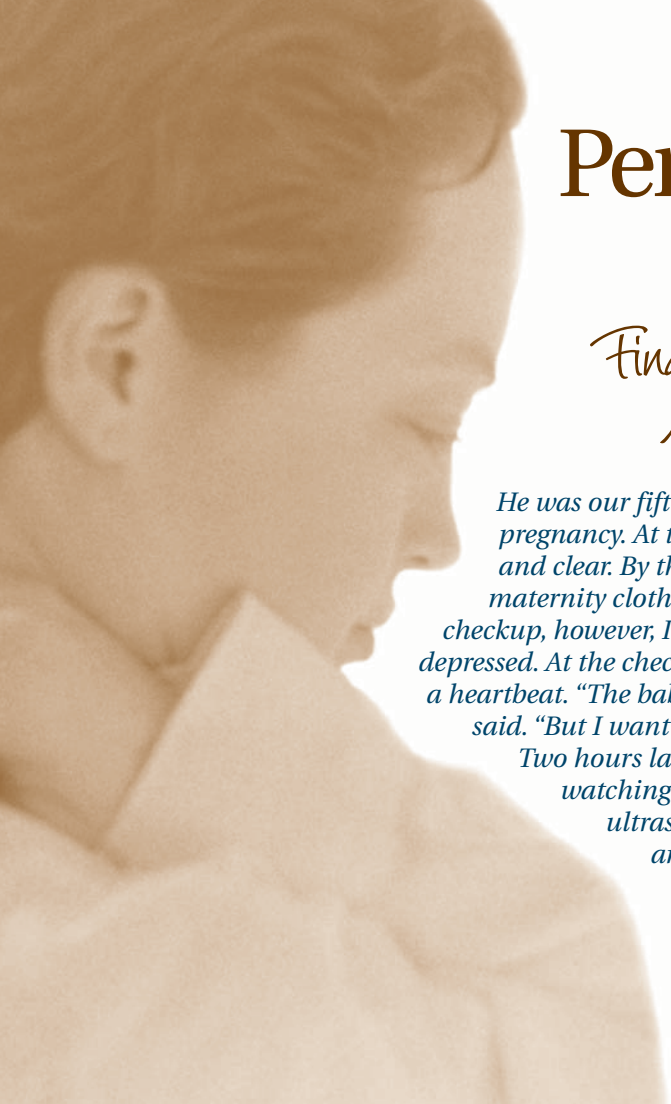
Dedicated to the memory of Andrew Timothy House
and all the other precious babies lost through miscarriage.



Permission to Grieve

Finding Healing and Hope After Miscarriage

He was our fifth baby, and it had been an uneventful pregnancy. At three months, the heartbeat was strong and clear. By three-and-a-half months, I was into maternity clothes. A week before my four-month checkup, however, I felt odd — unusually tired, inexplicably depressed. At the checkup, the midwife couldn't seem to find a heartbeat. "The baby may just be in an odd position," she said. "But I want you to get an ultrasound right away."

Two hours later, I was lying on an examination table, watching my baby's body appear on an ultrasound screen. Perfect-looking … and perfectly still. No pulsating heart. I was numb with shock … until I walked out the door 10 minutes later.

I was met by one of the most beautiful May days I had ever seen. Bright blue skies, puffy white clouds, brilliant sunshine, flowers in bloom everywhere. And right outside the door, a magnolia tree was in full bloom, its waxy-pink blossoms bursting with life. A wave of white-hot anger surged through me. How dare the world look so beautiful today! Doesn't it know — doesn't God care — that my baby is dead?!

Later that night, after an induced labor, I held Andrew's 5-inch long body in my hands. I marveled at the incredible details — facial features, muscle definition, exquisite little hands and feet — that were already there, and I reeled from the intensity of a grief that I had known only after the death of my mother.

In spite of my fervent conviction that human life is in the "image and likeness of God" from conception, one thing had never before been obvious to me: the bonding of my spirit with that of my unborn baby. I already had loved him dearly; and so his death dealt me a blow that had nothing to do whatsoever with his physical size or the brevity of the time that he had lived inside me. — Caroline

When a baby is lost through a miscarriage, most mothers — and fathers — need to be given "permission to grieve." Too often, well-meaning individuals minimize the loss — as if, somehow, the fact that the child was never carried to term makes him or her unimportant (or, at least, far less important). Yet the grief and sense of loss can be just as strong and prolonged as with the death of an older child or other relative.

Whether you have had a miscarriage — or you know someone who has — we pray that this booklet will help on the journey toward healing and hope.

Ps. 22:10
… [F]rom my mother's womb you have been my God.

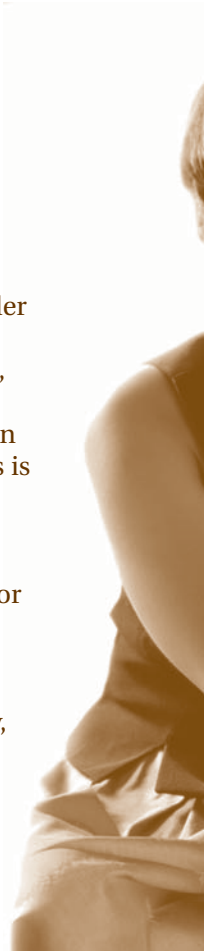
Ps. 139:13
For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.

Common Reactions to a Miscarriage

Whether they are experienced immediately or later, the emotional and psychological responses to a miscarriage typically parallel those of any significant loss. In particular, the cycle of grief needs to be accepted and completed in order for healing to occur. Many who have studied the grief process delineate five stages one must navigate: shock and denial, anger, depression and detachment, dialogue and bargaining, and (finally) acceptance. It's important to note that these stages seldom are experienced in a linear progression, but rather tend to occur in spiraling cycles until the loss is resolved.

Receiving permission to grieve and acknowledging the loss are crucial. Otherwise, the bereaved person can get stuck in denial, repressed emotions or depression, which can greatly impact one's spiritual, emotional and physical health.

Women who have lost a baby sometimes feel guilty — and relive the pregnancy, trying to recall what they might have done (or not done) that could have caused the miscarriage. With rare exceptions, such as drug or alcohol abuse or gross malnutrition, such guilt is unfounded and is simply a normal maternal reaction.



What Hurts the Parent(s) of a Miscarried Child

Far too often, well-meaning people add further hurt by saying or doing inappropriate things — or, conversely, by failing to show concern and compassion. Ministering in a healing, helpful way to someone who's experienced a miscarriage is the same as with any other kind of death.

Nobody said much. Perhaps they didn't know what to say, but I was grieving — and just wanted to know that people cared.

— Lauren

[Some people] … said the most hurtful words but with the best intentions like, "You are young; you will have time to have [more] children" and "Maybe this is God's way of saying your baby wasn't healthy."

— Emily[1]

The doctor in the ultrasound room said to me, "You're still young and healthy and can have more children." Maybe I could, maybe I couldn't. How would he have felt if his wife had just died and someone said, "That's too bad. On the other hand, there are lots of other women out there and you'll undoubtedly get married again."?

— Caroline

Don't Say …

Gee, I know — I'm having a rough time right now, too. The last thing they need right now is to hear about your problems — unless someone you love just died, also.

I can imagine how you feel. If you haven't lost a child, you can't.

It's a blessing. Your baby probably was deformed. No matter your motives, this is **not** a comforting comment — and it perpetuates the fallacy that human life is only valuable when it comes in a "perfect package."

It's not like it was a full-term baby. The human spirit has no "size." The person created in the image and likeness of God is fully there from conception — regardless of the size or capabilities of the body and mind.

Please let me know if there's anything I can do. It sounds nice, but it puts the burden on the bereaved person to think of something, and then have to ask for help.

God had a purpose for this. No matter how this squares — or doesn't square — with Scripture, it turns a baby's death into a mere movement of a pawn on a chessboard. In fact, it makes God out to be the "bad guy" in the situation, and He isn't.

Ps. 145:9
The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made.

What Helps?

Pray for the grieving parent(s). Ask, "How can I pray for you right now?" Then remember to pray — and, ideally, keep up with their prayer needs on a regular basis for the first few months.

Send a personal note or card — but avoid the temptation to preach or find a reason for the miscarriage. If you've experienced a miscarriage, however, sharing that fact can communicate the message, "You're not alone, and I understand." A few words validating the parents' loss can be very comforting.

My next-door neighbor brought over a fruit basket, a warm and funny novel and a note that simply said, "I'm so sorry." — Julie

I have a collection of mementos of Andrew. It's primarily filled with notes and cards that people sent — which even now, almost 10 years later, are very meaningful to me. — Caroline

Mt. 18:10,14

[Jesus said] "See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. … [Y]our Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.

Think of one or two specific things that you could do — bring a meal, watch other children for several hours, do the laundry, run errands, take care of yard work — then call and ask if you could do so. Even small gestures of practical help can be very comforting.

Right before I lost the baby, we had done a lot of spring yard work — and had a bunch of leaf bags sitting on our front porch. Our next-door neighbor came over a couple of days later and quietly hauled all of them out to the curb for us.
— Caroline

Churches — and pastors — need to be encouraged to acknowledge the death of an unborn baby the way other deaths are noted — whether that's through a note in the church bulletin, a Sunday service announcement, flowers or whatever. Especially when a church is active in "sanctity of human life" teaching and ministry in the community, it is absolutely essential that a mixed message not be conveyed by ignoring or minimizing the deaths of babies through miscarriage!

My church had a single, long-stemmed red rose delivered to me. — Lauren

Make yourself available to listen. Don't make the mistake of thinking you have to say something appropriate or profound. Most of the time, the gift of listening, your tears and/or a warm hug can help more than anything you could possibly say.

Make a donation to a favorite charity in memory of the child. Or, if there is a burial, make a donation toward a headstone or other related expenses.

Send a note or flowers at the time the baby would have been born. This is something seldom thought of, but can be *very* comforting at a time, months later, that usually brings renewed grief.

Healing From a Miscarriage

Read Scriptures about heaven (where your baby now is) and God's love and trustworthiness.

Your body, emotions, mind and spirit have gone through a significant shock — so allow yourself time to recover and heal. Try to take extra good care of yourself in the first few months after the miscarriage.

"The length of the grief process is different for everyone. Although it can be quite painful at times, the grief process cannot be rushed. It is important to be patient with yourself as you experience the feelings and your unique reactions to the loss. With time and support, things generally do get better. However, it is normal for significant dates, holidays or other reminders to trigger feelings related to the loss."

"Taking care of yourself, seeking support and acknowledging your feelings during these times are ways that can help you cope."[2]

Talk to others who have gone through a miscarriage.
It's so healing to know you're not alone. — Lauren

Even if the gender of your miscarried baby was unknown, it can be very comforting (and appropriate) to go ahead and name the baby and remember him or her as either a boy or a girl.

When people ask about your family, decide for yourself if you want to include the baby you lost with other children you may have. Should you choose to do so, one way to say it is, "I have three children — two living and one in heaven." On the other hand, you are not being disloyal to your miscarried baby if you choose not to refer to him or her. There is no right or wrong in this situation.

Is. 65:17,19,20

[God said] "Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. … [T]he sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more. Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days …"

[What] got me through my miscarriage experience was my faith in God as my Father, Creator, Provider and Protector. Yes, I felt the physical pain and emotional loss that accompanies any miscarriage, but … I knew God was looking out for me. … I also cling to the fact that at the moment of conception, my baby had the spark of life and a God-given soul.

— Lauren

What Husbands Can Do to Help

The roughest thing for me when my wife miscarried was my feeling of powerlessness. I wanted to "fix it," but nothing I said was comforting. In the end, I had to trust that all of this was in God's hands. — Chuck

The father of the miscarried baby often feels helpless to understand his wife's grief — and other reactions that may accompany it. Unless it's a very late miscarriage, the baby probably was not as real to him as it was to his wife, and there's no way he can have experienced the same bond that his wife had with the child inside her. So, sometimes he has trouble identifying with his wife's grief and sense of loss.

Lam. 3:33

For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men.

With our first miscarriage, I had this attitude, "It's not really a baby." I didn't understand the extent of my wife's grief — I expected her to get over it in two or three months. So when she experienced a renewed grief at the one-year anniversary [of the miscarriage], I wasn't supportive.
— Justin

However, the father has a profound — and very healing — role to play at this time. He can both validate his wife's grief and protect her from unnecessary hurt.

[After the miscarriage], I took some time off to deal with the loss before returning to work. — Chuck

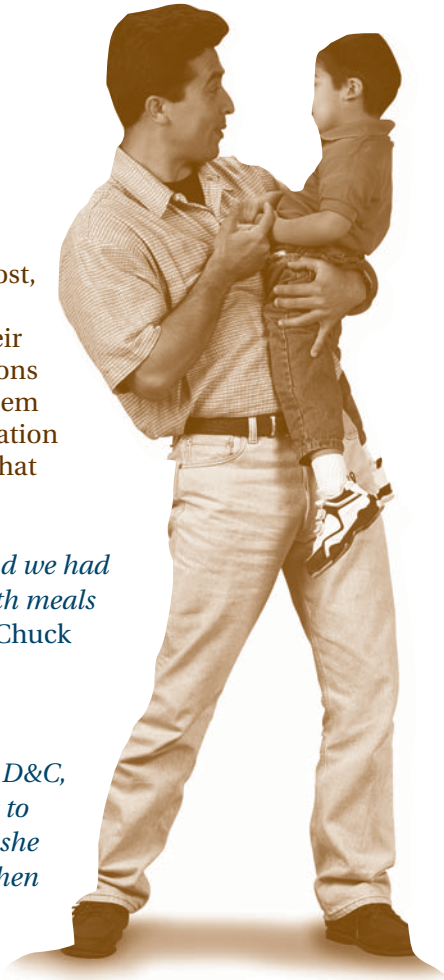
The best thing you can do [as a husband] at this time is protect your wife from thoughtless people and thoughtless comments.
— Justin

Don't Forget
Dads and Siblings

While a miscarriage naturally impacts the mother the most, the baby's father and other children in the family (if any) should not be forgotten. They may be struggling with their own feelings of shock, confusion and loss. Simple questions like "How are you doing? Do you want to talk?" can let them know they're not forgotten. A phone call, a note, an invitation to have coffee or get ice cream will convey the message that "I know you've experienced a loss, too — and I care!"

Our first child was miscarried around Christmas time, and we had no family in the area. Co-workers came over every day with meals and flowers. — Chuck

Our family doctor is a wonderful woman who knows the importance of treating the whole person. Even though an OB/GYN handled the (induced labor) and the subsequent D&C, "Dr. Jan" took the time to stop by the hospital the next day to simply say, "I'm so sorry." Two weeks later, at my checkup, she made sure to ask my husband how he was doing — and then gave him a hug. — Caroline



Healing Ways to Remember Your Baby

Mk. 10:14
[Jesus] … said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these."

Funeral homes often will provide a grave and a small casket and liner for a miscarried or stillborn baby at such a low cost that it really is an act of compassion rather than a profit-making venture. Even the purchase of a small grave marker — while more costly — can be well worth the money in terms of the comfort and lasting memorial provided.

Put together a special "memory box" of your baby: ultrasound pictures (if any), condolence notes, dried flowers, journal notes.

Make a gift of some kind to a pregnancy resource center or other favorite charity every year in memory of your baby.

The due date for my baby was in July, and every July, I (privately) celebrate the beautiful creation of that life, knowing that one day I will see that life in heaven.
— Lauren

Precious Little One

Precious, tiny little one
You'll always be to me
So perfect, pure and innocent —
Part of heaven's family.

We dreamed of you and your life
And all that it would be.
We waited and longed for you to come
And join our family.

We never had the chance to play,
To laugh, to rock, to wiggle.
We long to hold you, touch you now
And listen to you giggle.

I'll always be your mother,
He'll always be your dad.
You'll always be our child,
The child that we had.

Now you're gone … but yet you're here
We sense you everywhere.
You're our sorrow and our joy,
There's love in every tear.

Just know our love goes deep and strong,
We'll forget you never —
The child we had but never had,
And yet will have forever.[3]

Hope and Comfort
From the Bible (NIV)

Ps. 22:10 … [F]rom my mother's womb you have been my God.

Ps. 139:13 For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.

Jer. 1:5 Before I formed you in the womb I knew you …

Ps. 145:9 The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made.

Lam. 3:33 For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men.

Is. 49:15 [God said] "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!"

2 Cor. 1:3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort …

Is. 65:17, 19b, 20 [God said] "Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. … [T]he sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more. Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days …"

Mk. 10:14, 16 [Jesus] … said to them, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these …” And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them.

Mt. 18:10, 14 [Jesus said] “See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. … [Y]our Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.”

2 Cor. 5:1 Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.

Rev. 21:1–4 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. … And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

Helpful Resources

Empty Arms, by Pam Vredevelt, available through Focus on the Family's Web site: www.family.org/resources/itempg.cfm?itemid=2990.

Every year, thousands of mothers feel joy turn to grief with the loss of an infant. Pam Vredevelt, a licensed professional counselor, knows from personal experience what this means. She provides honest help in 18 chapters including "Managing Anger," "Spiritual Battles and Emotions" and "Husbands Hurt, Too."

Aid for women who have experienced pregnancy loss:

M.E.N.D.
(Mommies Enduring Neonatal Death)
P.O. Box 1007
Coppell, TX 75019
(972) 459-2396
www.mend.org

Hannah's Prayer
P.O. Box 5016
Auburn, CA 85604-5016
www.hannah.org

Also, check with local hospitals and mental health centers for pregnancy loss support groups and programs.

Endnotes

[1] Christian Miscarriage Support Group message boards.

[2] "Life After Loss: Dealing With Grief" (The University of Texas at Austin — The Counseling & Mental Health Center, 1999).

[3] Adapted from poem by the same name, author unknown, Christian Miscarriage Support Group (used with permission).

Please note: Pseudonyms have been used to protect the privacy of the individuals.

Common Reactions to Miscarriage

Guilt — "I must have done something wrong."

Denial — "Maybe there's a mistake. Maybe I'm still pregnant."

Depression

Mood swings

Anger — often masks grief.

Jealousy — toward pregnant women or women with babies.

Withdrawal — from social contacts.

The grief cycle — shock and denial, anger, depression and detachment, dialogue and bargaining, acceptance.

www.heartlink.org

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