

Loss of child upsets life's natural order

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Doreen Arcus, psychologist and professor, UMass Lowell

How is the loss of a child different than another death?

Grieving is such a process. It's not something that you do one day and then the next day. And the closer you are to the person you've lost, the more complicated a process, and the longer it takes. But particularly with a child, things have happened out of order. We have this notion that we expect things to go a certain way. So when your grandmother dies, she's lived a long life and arrived at death on a typical path. But when a child dies, in addition to grief and mourning, it doesn't make sense in the way we hold on to these unquestioned ideas about what it means to be a parent. You raise your children -- they're the ones at your funeral, and it doesn't make sense that children die before their parents. It's out of the natural order of things. And it turns your world upside down.

Talk a bit about the psychology of fertility problems.

When somebody is trying very hard to have a baby, she gets evidence every 28 days that it failed. Then one month she gets evidence that it worked, and that minute, psychologically, that is a child to her; psychologically the baby's there. For people trying to conceive, and using fertility treatments, they're anticipating so much and their minds and hearts are so ready from the very beginning that it's a baby, not a pregnancy.

But many don't equate pregnancy loss or miscarriage with the loss of a young child.

It really is sort of limbo land. Friends and relatives might not have shared that same anxious anticipation for a baby. They might not have had that same desperate longing for the child, and their bodies haven't changed. They never had a baby to hold and cuddle, so for them, the loss is theoretical. But it is so not nothing.

It's got to be a different experience for men and women.

Her body has changed, and from the very beginning ... the organism there has affected her entire body. To the person who's anticipated and yearned for the child so much, in her heart there's a presence there, there is a baby, and to have that loss for that woman is so profound because she's experienced all the physical changes.

What about those people who say, "You can try again, it's not the end of the world"?

The people who are lobbing clichés in an attempt to be helpful probably genuinely care, but don't genuinely share in the loss. For them it's a bump in the road and you're still driving. For the woman who's lost the pregnancy, it's so much more; it's a huge detour and you don't know if you're going to get back on that road.

How can friends and family help, even when it seems like no one knows what to say?

I think the thing to do is to be affirming, to give the person who is mourning an opportunity to talk about how they're feeling. Say something like, "I can't imagine how you feel; I haven't been through what you have," but make inquiries that will allow the individual a chance to express their emotions if they choose to do so. The more empathetically you can respond, the better off everybody is.

Speak to other women out there who have faced these kinds of pregnancy losses. It's tremendously helpful because it's not theory to them; they've felt it, too. Even books, movies -- that sort of camaraderie and support can be very helpful. It isn't all just in your head -- it really does just feel so horrible, and when somebody says, "it's so hard," you can say, "Yeah, it really is."

Do you have a question for the expert?

E-mail Christine Phelan at cphelan@lowellsun.com.