

The painful collision between work life and pregnancy loss

December 21 2020, by Jennifer Dimoff, Jacquelyn Brady and Stephanie Gilbert



Model Chrissy Teigen's Instagram post announcing her miscarriage.

"It is with broken hearts that we share the news that our baby ... was born sleeping. I will not be back into the office for another two weeks,

as I need that time to heal, both physically and psychologically. Thank you for your patience and understanding during this incredibly difficult time."—An email excerpt written by a senior consulting group manager to inform clients that her first daughter was stillborn.

With recent celebrity disclosures of [pregnancy loss making headlines](#), including Meghan, the Duchess of Sussex's opinion piece in the [New York Times](#) announcing her miscarriage, more women are taking to social media to share similar stories of pain and disclosure.

Their shared experiences underscore the reality that [one in four pregnancies ends in loss](#).

Miscarriage and stillbirth ([pregnancy loss before and after 20 weeks, respectively](#)) are remarkably common and can have pervasive impacts on work and life. Employees who have lost a pregnancy are more likely to [quit their jobs, change careers and suffer from impaired work performance for months to years](#). For these employees and their organizations, pregnancy loss is not just a personal issue, but also a workplace issue.

Pregnancy loss and work

As a [highly stigmatized health issue](#), pregnancy loss is rarely discussed or supported at work. Employees who lose a pregnancy may return to work [still dealing with physical symptoms and psychological distress](#) often augmented by social stigma, loneliness and isolation.

Furthermore, showing distress at work—like breaking down or crying—is often considered unprofessional. That means employees are likely to hide their pain, which can [lead to burnout](#) and interfere with the grief process.

As a participant in [one of our studies](#) put it: "Nobody at work wants to address it, nobody wants to talk about grief or what the aftermath of that looks like. Everybody's nervous about saying the wrong thing, and nervous about somebody crying if you bring it up."

Due to experiences like this one, employees may be less likely to disclose pregnancy loss, leading them to suffer in silence. Some employees may return to work while still physically recovering and may wonder if they could be to blame for the loss, leading to feelings of [shame, guilt](#) and [reduced confidence](#).

Women may even actively miscarry while at work without disclosing their situation. Employees may choose not to disclose or discuss loss at work due to fear of [discrimination, stigma and a lack of awareness](#). One [employee](#) described disclosing her pregnancy loss to her manager: "After my first miscarriage, I told a few people at work. My manager, who I had had a good relationship with, asked me how far along I was, and when I told her I was 14 weeks along, her response was: "Well, it was only a ball of cells at that point, it wasn't really a baby yet." To me, it wasn't a ball of cells at all, it was a baby and I had heard his heartbeat."

Similar responses are plastered all over social media. Just read the comments following Meghan's *New York Times* op-ed or any of [Chrissy Teigen's Instagram photos](#) depicting her recent pregnancy loss.

These comments reflect societal beliefs that [pregnancy loss is not a legitimate loss](#), and that "unborn" is synonymous with "unloved." As a result, employees experiencing this type of loss may be denied the support that they need.

Supporting employees through pregnancy loss

Although most employers are grossly ill-equipped to support employees

after pregnancy loss, they have the [power to change](#).

Employers stand to gain by providing support to employees experiencing pregnancy loss and addressing the associated stigma.

In doing so, employers can improve retention, promote positive work outcomes and support employee health and well-being. Such support could involve:

1. Adopting compassionate and flexible maternity, parental and/or [bereavement leave options](#) that are inclusive of pregnancy loss.
2. [Establishing policies and practices](#) that identify and accommodate the specific needs of bereaved employees.
3. Providing [free access](#) to psychological counseling, and [reminding recently bereaved employees of these resources](#).
4. Building a [psychologically safe culture](#) where employees can disclose pregnancy loss and other stigmatized topics without fear of repercussions.
5. [Training supervisors](#) on how to best acknowledge grief and support grieving employees.

Through these efforts, employers may be able to temper the suffering caused by the inescapable collision between loss and work.

Authors' Note: More research is needed on the working experiences of employees following [pregnancy](#) loss and how current organizational practices influence their work and well-being outcomes. To participate in this research or learn more, please contact us at stephanie_gilbert@cbu.ca.

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