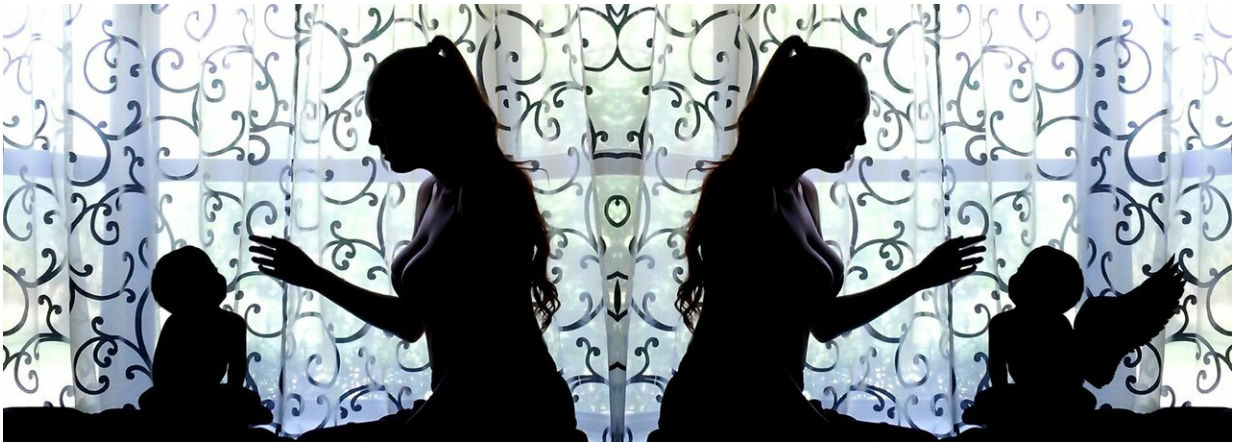


Workplaces can do better to support women following miscarriage, says study

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A new study led by the University of Sydney has found 68 percent of women who returned to work following a miscarriage reported receiving no support or negative support from their HR departments.

The study, recently published in *The Journal of Community, Work & Family*, was conducted from March to May 2020 and surveyed over 600 Australian women aged 18 years and over who experienced one or more miscarriages.

Recent research shows [miscarriage](#) occurs in up to one in four

pregnancies and is associated with high levels of distress, anxiety, and depression. However, lead author Dr. Melanie Keep said to date there has been very little research on women's experiences of returning to work.

"This study sought to understand the breadth of women's experiences. In particular through investigating aspects of returning to work like the type of leave women took following miscarriage and the extent to which they felt supported. We wanted to give employers some firsthand guidance on what they could do to better [support](#) women through this challenging time," said Dr. Keep from the University of Sydney's Faculty of Medicine and Health.

Dr. Keep conducted the research in partnership with Dr. Jane Ellen Carland, Senior Hospital Scientist at St Vincent's Hospital and Senior Lecturer at the University of New South Wales, and Samantha Payne, CEO and Co-Founder of Pink Elephants, a not-for-profit organization supporting women following miscarriage.

The study found:

- The majority (85 percent) of participants reported taking leave of a median duration of seven days following their miscarriage, with most using paid sick or annual leave.
- Almost four in five (79 percent) participants informed their workplace that they had miscarried.
- Most women surveyed received informal support from colleagues and managers, rather than receiving official or professional support from the business.
- 88 percent reported they were somewhat or well supported by colleagues.
- 74 percent reported they were somewhat or well supported by their managers

- 68 percent report receiving no support or negative support from HR departments upon their return to work after a miscarriage.

The research was conducted prior to the recent change to the Fair Work Act in September 2021, "Leave for Loss," which now stipulates women who experience miscarriage receive two days of paid compassionate leave from their workplace.

Previously this provision was only available following a stillbirth, defined as a pregnancy loss occurring from 20 weeks gestation, and decisions for leave following miscarriage remained at the discretion of employers.

What can workplaces do differently?

Co-author Samantha Payne, CEO and Co-Founder of Pink Elephants who lobbied for the amendment to the Fair Work Act for three years before its implementation, said, "We believe there is a clear lack of understanding and awareness in workplaces about this issue.

"Women who have experienced miscarriage are too frequently relying on themselves and their own networks to navigate what is an incredibly difficult time in their lives. We need to change the stigma around miscarriage in the workplace, so that women returning to work can openly discuss their experience if they choose to do so.

"Within the survey, we found those who chose not to disclose their miscarriage to their workplace did so due to concerns around how it could impact their job prospects, particularly in male-dominated work environments. This is not good enough. Workplaces need to act quickly to foster more inclusive workplaces so that [women](#) and their partners are met with empathy and understanding, support resources and clear [bereavement](#) policies for pregnancy loss."

Need for organization-wide culture of support

The findings suggest that although individuals within teams can create supportive workplace environments, there is a need to build an organization-wide culture of support.

The authors cite examples such as staff pages with links to consumer-led support programs; ensuring that leave policies allow access to paid bereavement leave after miscarriage; providing flexible work arrangements and/or return-to-work plans, and support for open conversations from leadership about pregnancy loss and fertility particularly in male-dominated organizations, or organizations with male-dominated leadership.

Reflecting on her own experience of pregnancy loss in a recent perspective in the *Medical Journal of Australia*, Dr. Keep writes, "As an academic in health, it is perhaps unsurprising that my workplace was supportive when I requested leave following my loss. Although I was physically capable of responding to emails, designing a curriculum and completing research tasks ... I did not have the cognitive or emotional capacity to work at the pace at which I had previously worked."

"Bereavement [leave](#) is partly about the time, partly about the financial support, and a lot about validation. It is also only the start of workplace-based support for parents."

More information: Melanie Keep et al, Experiences of Australian women on returning to work after miscarriage, *Community, Work & Family* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/13668803.2021.1993140](https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2021.1993140)

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