

Hidden Loss

by Leslie Kausch, M.Ed. LPC, Licensed Counselor



It took me almost the whole first session to start asking the right questions. She came to see me saying that her life was fine. She had a loving husband, a delightful son, work she enjoyed, good friends, but she felt ... lost. I explored her history. She reported no significant changes in her life in the last year, and she said she had gotten a clear bill of health at her last physical.

When I started getting a better handle on her 'symptoms', I thought they sounded a lot like grief – sense of disconnection, no real appetite, little interest in activities she used to enjoy. When I told her what I was thinking, she looked at me for a long minute, and I could see her mind working.

She started hesitantly, as if what she was thinking couldn't really be the issue. She admitted that she had lost a pregnancy earlier in the year. She was 11 weeks along when it happened, and she and the doctors never really understood why she lost the pregnancy. When she thought about it, we were getting close to what would have been her due date.

Pregnancy and infant loss are astonishingly common. It is estimated that only 1 in 4 pregnancies result in a live baby. Yet, for its frequency, there is little support for a newly bereaved couple after the loss of a pregnancy or infant. Heartbroken couples are told that they can just try for another baby, that this must have been for the best, that they are better off. The assumption here is that the baby a woman carries isn't really a person, that the parents don't really 'know' the baby, that the loss hardly matters. This couldn't be further from the truth. Research shows clearly that mothers start becoming attached to their young one very early in gestation. And if all goes well, Mom has a supportive partner or friend who is helping out and becoming attached to the baby as well, even before the baby's born.

Even if you take the physical connection out of the equation, a family starts changing their relationships, their home, their lives to make room for their child, sometimes even before conception. Once a pregnancy is confirmed, a baby starts taking up increasing space in Mom's belly, and in the minds of the family.

They make plans, imagine what the baby will be like, what they'll like to do together. Siblings start anticipating the arrival, imagining their new role. Families often pick out names early. The baby's place in the family becomes very real, even before birth. Once we were able to talk about her loss, and name it as a significant issue, she was able to grieve more openly. With support, her family was able to face the issue directly, acknowledging the loss and their grief more openly.

Heartstrings offers local support for pregnancy, infant, and child loss, with a variety of support groups and one-to-one matches for bereaved parents. They can be reached at 336-335-9931 or <http://www.heartstringssupport.org>

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