

Coping With Perinatal Loss:

A Self-help Skills Resource For Women Seeking
Support After Miscarriage Or Stillbirth



Judith Arthur, RD, MA (Psych), RCC

Coping With Perinatal Loss: A Self-help Skills Resource for Women Seeking Support After Miscarriage or Stillbirth.

Copyright © 2016 by Judith C Arthur

All rights reserved.

Citation:

Arthur, J. C. (2016). *Coping With Perinatal Loss: A Self-help Skills Resource for Women Seeking Support After Miscarriage or Stillbirth*. Surrey, Canada.

Front cover illustration reproduced/adapted with permission from the Best Start Resource Centre.

Judith Arthur would like to thank her faculty supervisor and expert reviewer who gave his time and support to this workbook.

- Dr. Peter Hall PhD, Dean of the Faculty of Behavioural Sciences, Yorkville University

Judith Arthur also thanks all those who contributed to the development of this booklet.

Workbook illustrations on front cover, page 13, page 15, page 26, and page 28 were created by Claire Louise Milne.

Copies of this workbook can be downloaded at no cost from: sacredcirclecounselling.com

This resource is intended for:

- Women dealing with a pregnancy loss or stillbirth and
- Clinicians and service providers working with women coping with pregnancy loss or stillbirth in one-on-one or group settings.
- Concerned partners, family members or friends may also find this resource helpful.

This workbook is meant to provide accurate information about grief and perinatal. It is not a treatment plan. If expert assistance or treatment is needed, the services of a competent health care professional should be sought.

Table of Contents

Introduction: What is Grief.....	4
What is Perinatal Loss	5
What is Perinatal Bereavement.....	5
Perinatal Bereavement, Gender Differences.....	6
Worden’s Four Tasks of Mourning.....	7
The Disenfranchised Grief of Perinatal Loss.....	7
Common Grief Reactions	8
Physical Reactions.....	9
Emotional Reactions.....	10
Cognitive Reactions.....	12
Social Reactions.....	13
Spiritual Reactions.....	14
Coping with Grief Reactions.....	15
Giving Yourself Permission to Mourn.....	16
Honoring Your Loss: Restorative rituals.....	18
Leaning into Grief.....	23
Managing Triggers and Life Markers.....	24
Healing With Gentle Self-Care.....	26
Resources.....	32
References.....	35

Introduction: What is Grief?



Image Source: <https://www.uk-sands.org/professionals/resources-for-professionals>

Grief is one of the most profound and painful experiences that we face as human beings. It stems from the love or bond that we share with another person. When we are separated by death from a loved one, it is natural to feel the intense pain of grief. The grieving process is often described as a journey because it is marked by some common emotions and behaviors that are characteristic of grief. For example, individuals who are grieving often experience psychological distress and may have constant thoughts of the person who died. On the journey of grief, the task of the mourner is to take steps down a foreign pathway that is often unexpected and unwelcomed. Although grief is a universal experience, grieving is very individual, so there are observable differences in the course, duration, and intensity of grief which is shaped by one's gender, cultural and belief systems, one's relationship to the deceased, the circumstances surrounding the loss and many more factors. If you are reading this workbook, you have likely lost a pregnancy or expected baby, and are experiencing profound grief. This workbook was created to offer a way through your grief during a time where there are often more 'whys' than 'hows'.

What is Perinatal Loss?



Image Source: <http://www.drdeborahsimmons.com/many-kinds-pregnancy-losses/>

Perinatal loss occurs when a pregnancy unexpectedly ends via a miscarriage, or a baby unexpectedly dies before or after delivery.

Perinatal loss is different than other losses in that it involves the relinquishment of your plans, hopes and dreams for a future baby as well as the abrupt disruption of love and attachment bonds shared between mother and her expected baby ¹. For many couples, their expected baby is viewed as member of the family. Research indicates that the grief associated from losing an expected baby can

complex and enduring, but there is hope ². Although there is no timeline for grief, it tends to lessen in intensity with time for most grievers ³.

What is Perinatal Bereavement?

Perinatal bereavement refers to the period after perinatal loss during which the expectant mother mourns the loss of her expected baby ⁴. Because of the burgeoning bond between mother and expected baby is a unique and powerful experience, a miscarriage and stillbirth can feel life-shattering and is marked with waves of emptiness, sadness, helplessness, and longing. Contrary to popular belief, the duration of a pregnancy is not related to the level of grief experienced by the expectant mother ³.

Perinatal Bereavement: Gender Differences and the Impact on Relationships

There are significant differences in the way women and men experience and process perinatal loss. Research indicates that the grief experienced by women who have lost a baby tends to be more intense and longer lasting compared to men⁵. However, active engagement in prenatal procedures such as ultrasound imagining tends to strengthen the bond between baby and both parents which may increase of the intensity of grief experienced by expectant fathers after perinatal loss⁵. Although women and men experience similar reactions after perinatal loss including sadness, helplessness, emptiness, and anger, women often experience guilt whereas this is less common for men⁵.

The loss of baby can be a strain on a romantic relationship and may be a risk factor for the break-up of a relationship⁵. However, emotional support between couples after perinatal loss is an important protective factor to sustain the relationship through the bereavement process⁵. When couples are able to create space in their relationship to share their grief with each other, this can strengthen the relationship and promote healing⁵.

Worden's Four Tasks of Mourning

To understand the difference between grief and mourning, think of a door. One side of a door faces the outside world and the other side of a door can only be seen from the inside. Grief is like the inside of the door because it is an internal private experience that reflects the thoughts and feelings of the griever. Mourning is like the outside of the door because it is an external open experience that happens every time you express your grief through tears or talk about the pain of your loss.

In his book, *Grief Counselling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner*, Dr. J. William Worden, a leading expert on death, grief and bereavement, outlined the following tasks of mourning ⁶ which provide a roadmap for mourners to understand the grieving process:

- To accept the reality of the loss ⁶
- To process the pain of grief ⁶
- To adjust to a world without the deceased ⁶
- To find an enduring connection with the deceased in the midst of embarking on a new life ⁶

The Disenfranchised Grief of Perinatal Loss

Dr. Kenneth Doka, a leader in the field of grief, has increased our awareness about disenfranchised grief; this term refers to a death that is not validated by society as a significant loss ⁷. Many expectant mothers who experience a miscarriage or stillbirth notice that some family, friends, co-workers, and even health professionals fail to acknowledge the expected

baby that was lost which can feel distressing, disappointing, and frustrating. Disenfranchised grief tends to make grieving mothers feel isolated at a time when social support is sorely needed and can be healing. Generally, North Americans have great discomfort and apprehension with matters concerning death and grief. Typically, people are unsure of “what to say”, and fear doing or saying something that will stir up grief and make matters worse. As a result, many bereaved mothers experience a deafening silence which adds even more pain to an already difficult situation.

Over the past 30 years, medical research has helped to increase awareness of the psychological distress experienced during and after perinatal loss which can increase the risk of developing mental health disorders ⁸. Although disenfranchised grief is still a reality, over time, raising awareness may help to shift how society views perinatal loss and responds to it.

Common Grief Reactions:

During pregnancy, an expectant mother experiences numerous physical, emotional, psychological, and social changes ⁹. Since your body has been supporting another life, it will take time after a miscarriage or stillbirth for your body to return to a state of hormonal balance which may affect you emotionally and physically.

Similarly, grief associated with perinatal loss is experienced holistically. Meaning, it affects the bereaved on a physical, emotional, cognitive, social, and even spiritual level.

Physical Reactions

The shock of losing a baby can impact the physical body in many ways. Some examples of common physical reactions of grief include ⁶:

- muscle tension
- changes in appetite
- dry mouth
- fatigue or lack of energy
- restlessness
- insomnia or sleeping too much
- hollow feeling in the stomach
- pain
- diarrhea or constipation
- nausea, vomiting
- muscle weakness
- frequent sighing or shortness of breath
- crying or the inability to cry
- irritability
- tight feeling in the throat or chest

Just as each grieving woman is unique and her individual loss is different, the physical reactions to grief often present differently for each woman.

Emotional Reactions

After a miscarriage or stillbirth, you will likely experience a roller coaster of emotions as you grieve. Like waves in the ocean, your emotional reactions will peak and recede over and over again in the hours and days that follow.

The loss of an expected baby or the death of an infant can result in intense emotions including ⁶:

- sadness
- longing
- emptiness
- feeling overwhelmed
- loneliness
- shock
- helplessness
- depression
- anxiety, anxiety about future family planning
- anger
- resentment
- feeling betrayed
- guilt
- frustration
- regret
- fear
- numbness
- desire to join deceased loved one

Experiencing perinatal loss can lead to anxiety about future pregnancies, difficulty sleeping, depression, guilt, and shame. Although grief shares some similar characteristics with depression, there are distinct differences between the grief and clinical depression. For

example, the intensity of grief tends to lessen over time whereas clinical depression typically does not lessen with time alone.

In his book, *The Depression of Grief: Coping with Your Sadness and Knowing When to Get Help*, Psychologist, Dr. Alan Wolfelt, makes the following distinction between grief and clinical depression ¹¹:

Normal Grief <i>You have normal grief if you:</i>	Clinical Depression <i>You may be clinically depressed if you:</i>
Respond to comfort and support	Do not accept support
Are often openly angry	Are irritable and complain but does not directly express anger
Relate your depressed feelings to loss experience	Do not relate your feelings of depression to a particular life event
Can still experience moments of enjoyment in life	Exhibit an all-pervading sense of doom
Exhibit feelings of sadness and emptiness	Project a sense of hopelessness and chronic emptiness
May have transient physical complaints	Have chronic physical complaints
Express guilt over some aspect of the loss	Have generalized feelings of guilt
Feel a temporary loss of self-esteem	Feel deep and ongoing loss of self-esteem
(Wolfelt, 2014, p. 36)	

If you think you are depressed, read the companion workbook, “Managing Depression: A Self-help Skills Resource for Women Living With Depression After Perinatal Loss” for a comprehensive approach to managing depression. Also, contact your family doctor and mental health professional (counsellor or psychologist) for treatment options.

If you are having thoughts of ending your life, harming yourself or another person, please call your local crisis line or 911 immediately.

Cognitive Reactions



Image Source: <https://fiscfamily.wordpress.com/2011/07/>

Psychological reactions to grief can make you feel like “you’re going crazy”. This feeling can occur because the shock of your loss places great demands on the brain to make sense out of an experience that feels unreal. You may not be able to stop replaying the events surrounding your loss over and over again. For many women, this leads to retelling their story of loss repeatedly.

Common cognitive reactions to grief that you may experience include ⁶:

- Confusion
- Frequent retelling of what happened
- Feeling detached
- Feeling a sense of unreality
- Disbelief
- Constant thoughts of the lost baby
- Reflecting on previous losses
- Feeling crazy or like losing one’s mind
- Strong desire to keep busy
- Indifferent to daily activities
- Feeling numb
- Forgetfulness and poor concentration
- Feeling unmotivated
- Grief avoidance

Social Reactions

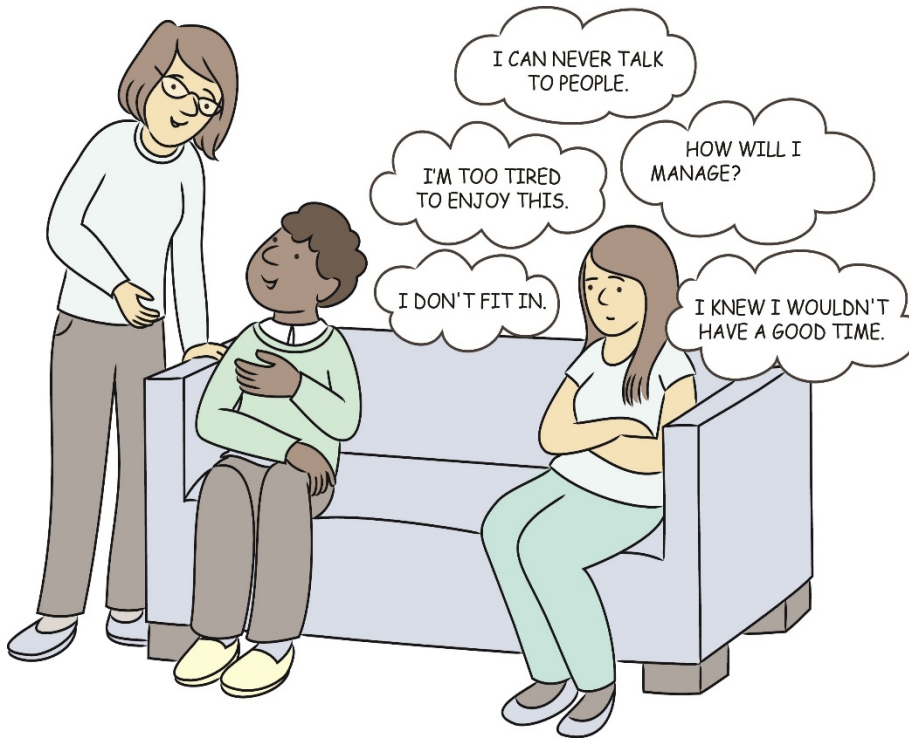


Illustration reproduced/adapted with permission from the Best Start Resource Centre

After a perinatal loss, women can feel like there is a massive white elephant in the room that very few people are willing to acknowledge. Socially, perinatal loss experiencers are at risk of being isolated because their grief may not be

validated by people in

their support network ¹². Being surrounded by a sea of people who do not recognize your loss as a painful life event can feel disturbing and lonely. After perinatal loss, you may also experience intense reactions to seeing other pregnant women and dealing with friends who are pregnant or have a healthy new baby. This may lead you to avoid socializing with certain friends which can be upsetting and make you feel isolated in your grief.

Common social reactions to grief for bereaved mothers may include ⁶:

- Distancing self from others
- Dependency on others
- Lack of interest in other's activities
- Taking up a cause

- Heightened sense of responsibility (focused on care-taking to avoid grief)
- Feeling self-conscious
- Changes in friendships

Spiritual Reactions

Whether you follow a religious path, a spiritual tradition, or have an unstructured belief system about life and death, most perinatal loss experiencers find themselves asking one word after the death of an expected baby: *why*. Grief makes us painfully aware of the mystery of life, and brings up doubt about things we thought we already knew with certainty. For some mourners, grief can lead to a crisis of faith and others may go on a spiritual quest to better understand the purpose and meaning of life. Experiencing loss can also make us more aware of our own mortality.

Some common spiritual reactions to grief may include ⁶:

- Blaming or feeling angry at God, Life, or the Universe
- Questioning pre-existing spiritual or religious beliefs
- Experiencing a lack of meaning or direction
- Feeling your lost loved one's presence
- Desire to maintain a bond with your lost loved one

Reflection Exercise

Can you relate to these grief reactions?

What are some of the physical, emotional, cognitive, social, and spiritual reactions that you are experiencing?

What thoughts and feelings came up for you when you reflected on your grief reactions?

Coping with Grief Reactions

Grief is extremely painful and often overwhelming; however, taking steps to express what is going on internally can help to prevent a delayed grief response to perinatal loss and lower your risk of having a complicated grieving process.

The following strategies can be helpful in working through perinatal bereavement:

- Work with a counsellor who specializes in bereavement support. A grief counsellor can help



Illustration reproduced/adapted with permission from the Best Start Resource Centre

workbook for details).

- Join an online perinatal loss community such as the Miscarriage Association or Faces of Loss, Faces of Hope (see website resources on page 33 of this workbook for details).
- Join a social media group that is dedicated to pregnancy loss and stillbirth.

to guide you through the grieving process and customize therapy for your unique situation.

- Join a local grief support group for women who have experienced perinatal loss. Positive social support can lower your risk of complicated grief³ (see support group resources on page 34 of this

- Find local perinatal loss events in your community to participate in raising awareness about miscarriage and stillbirth. October 15th is National Pregnancy and Infant Loss Remembrance Day, so your community may have scheduled events on this day.

Giving Yourself Permission to Mourn



Image Source: J. Arthur

Creating the space to mourn your lost baby is about validating the precious life that died before you had an opportunity to know her or him in physical form. In her book, *Remembering Well: Rituals for Celebrating Life and Mourning Death*, Sarah York, reminds us that “whether or not the child has breathed or been given a name, he or she has lived”.

Because the grief associated with perinatal loss is often not socially validated, it is important for bereaved mothers to take active steps towards acknowledging who and what was lost. The above photo depicts a memorial table that was set up in the home of a bereaved mother who had a miscarriage in her second trimester. This memorial table was festooned with a candle, framed art print of a little girl, flower garland, teddy bear, vase of pink roses, an open hands sculpture holding a turquoise heart, and an endless knot figurine. Each object represented some aspect of significance related the loss of her baby girl. The goal of creating a memorial table is to design a tangible

imprint that expresses the developing hopes, dreams, and the future that was envisioned as well as the grief that this lost baby girl left in the heart and mind of her bereaved mother. A memorial table can be transitioned into a memory box which can be pulled out from time to time to remember your lost baby. The effort of creating a memory table provides an opportunity for grief processing and transitioning the objects from the table into a memory box can provide validation of your lost baby's presence in your life ⁹.

Mothers who experience a stillbirth are increasingly being given the opportunity to hold their



Image Source: <http://barbarafane.com/loss-of-a-baby-or-child/>

deceased baby, take photographs, remove a locket of hair, and make footprints or handprints to signify the importance of the life that has been lost.

Studies indicate that this can be healing for some mothers, but distressing for others ¹¹. Nobody

knows what is right for you, better than you. If the

decision to hold your baby and take mementos was

not right for you, it is possible to adapt the memorial table idea for your situation. Simply take the time to think of objects that were significant to you or you felt drawn to during your pregnancy. The point is that this should be a very personal gathering and assembling of meaningful things that represent the bond that you shared with your lost child. In that way, each time you see your memorial table, you are consciously and unconsciously honoring your loss.

Reflection Exercise

Think about how you can tangibly acknowledge your lost baby, listen for the thoughts that surface, and take steps to honor your own intuitive wisdom. What do you feel guided to do?

Honoring your Loss: Restorative Rituals

Restorative rituals include activities that are guided by a profound purpose to mark a transition ¹⁰. For example, lighting a candle in remembrance of your lost baby on his or her expected due date could be a ritual that you perform each year. In the grieving process, rituals are acts that pay tribute to the person who died, honor your loss, help you deal with unfinished business, and can symbolize an important life marker ¹¹. There are some detailed examples of rituals here that may be helpful in honoring your loss.



Image Source: J. Arthur

Stone and Petal Ritual

The Stone and Petal ritual is a way to symbolically release a burden associated with your grieving process and reflect on something in life that still brings you joy.



Image Source: J. Arthur

When we are hurting, many of us are drawn to the healing qualities of water. Think of the soothing rhythmic sounds of lapping waves or the crashing surf of the ocean. Bodies of water has the amazing capacity to hold sea life, raindrops, and reflect the nature that surrounds it. The song, *The Ocean Rejects No River*, speaks to the receptivity of water as well as the ebb and flow associated with water on the planet. Bodies of water are also known as the womb of the universe because water carries and gives rise to life. The stone and petal ritual invites you to return to the water to release as well as reflect.

- Choose your favorite body of water to perform the ritual
 - Gather one or more stones. Let the stones pick you (choose whichever ones stand out to you)
-
- Gather several of your favorite flowers and remove the petals
 - Stand at the edge of your favorite body of water, holding the stone(s) in your hand. Close your eyes and think about a burden that you are carrying associated with your grief which you are ready to release. It can be anger, regret, shame, or anything else

that feels right to you. Feel the weight of the stone(s) in your hand(s). Imagine that your stone represents whatever emotion that you selected. Think about how this emotion weighs you down? When you are ready, throw the stone(s) into the water and watch the ripples that it creates when it lands on the water. The burden that you just released was having a ripple effect on your life as well.

- Gather the flower petals in your hands. Notice how light they feel compared to the stones that you have just released. Think about the things in your life which bring you joy, make you smile, and color your life with happiness. This may be a pet, nature walks, wildlife, a person, place, thing or experience. In your mind's eye, imagine how good it feels to enjoy this pleasurable person, place, thing or experience. Gently sprinkle the petals onto the water and watch them float on the surface of the water. The petals you have just sprinkled reflect the beauty and grace that remains in your life

This ritual reminds of that there is light in the darkness and it allows us to reflect on how we can utilize nature for grief processing and healing.

Balloon Release

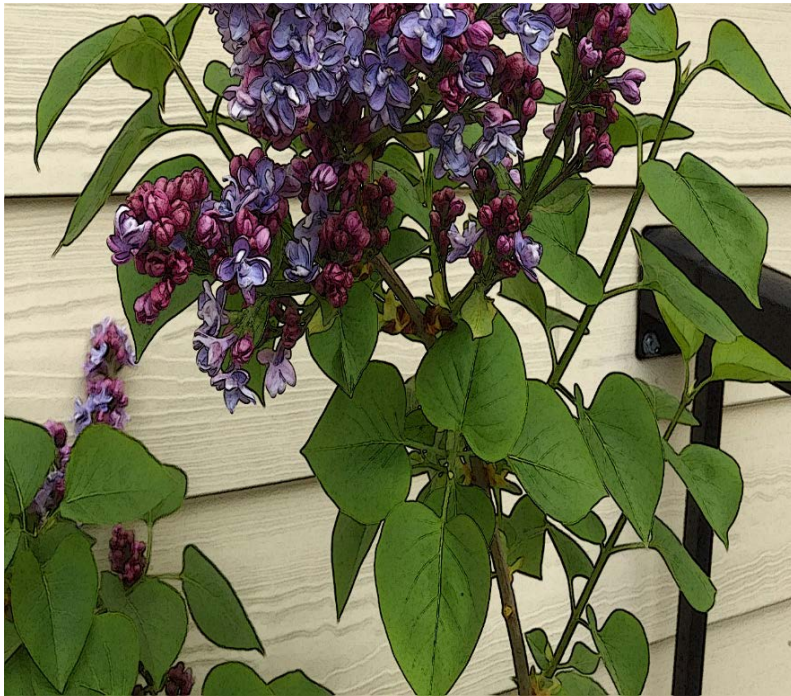


Image Source:
<https://www.pinterest.com/explore/balloon-release/>

Using sharpie to write a message to your deceased baby on a helium filled balloon. Your message may contain unresolved issues like any wishes and regrets. Find a location that is special to you for the balloon release. This can be done on a special occasion or a day that you are feeling like you still have thoughts and emotions that need to be expressed.

Tree or Flowering Shrub Planting Ceremony

Image Source: J. Arthur



Nature is a metaphor for life and death which can be observed through the seasons and the cycle of life. Many bereaved parents find comfort in planting a symbol of hope to honor their loss. The lilac bush pictured here was planted to mark the loss of an expected baby girl who died at 16-weeks

gestation due to genetic abnormalities. Now, this tree is a living memorial of all the hopes and dreams this lost baby represented to her expectant mom and dad. The tree is a symbol of love and hope for her parents, and its beautiful fragrant blossoms return each spring in memory of how much her short life touched her mom and dad. A memorial plaque sits at the base of the tree which is inscribed with her name, her expected due date, and an excerpt from the Michael Jackson song, "You are not Alone" which her mom sang to her each night when she was in her belly.

Consider planting a tree or flowering shrub which blooms annually in the month that your child was expected to be born or was born. If you live in an apartment, townhouse, or condo, the living memorial can be planted in a pot, so that it can be easily transported wherever you reside.

Additional Suggestions for Rituals to Memorialize your Loss

- Buy a piece of jewelry that symbolizes your loss. Wearing a symbol close to your body can be a source of comfort
- Get a symbolic tattoo or body art
- Start a memorial walk or run in honor of the deceased baby
- Create a shadow box using baby shoes, mittens, or a sleeper
- Create a memorial web page
- Create an art piece that captures your experience
- Create a fairy garden
- Frame mementos like foot prints, handprints, photos, or lock of hair
- Create a memory quilt using the deceased baby's clothing
- In honor of your deceased baby, donate homemade baked goods or volunteer your time to an organization that is meaningful to you
- Organize a walking labyrinth meditation and invite family and friends

Reflection Exercise

Can you think of another ritual that would be meaningful for you to perform to honor your lost baby?

Leaning into Grief

Denial and grief avoidance can delay the natural grieving process after perinatal loss and may lead to complicated grief³. For this reason, it is important to create outlets for expression during mourning. The goal is to accept or 'lean into' rather than fight, resist, or avoid the pain of grief. Writing letters to your deceased baby can be a therapeutic outlet for mourning because it allows mourners to express unresolved feelings such as guilt or regret, say goodbye, explore the depth of the loss, and express gratitude for their presence in your life¹². Writing letters to your deceased baby can promote acceptance and emotional awareness¹².

Grief Activity: Letter Writing

Find a quiet place to reflect where you will not be disturbed for about an hour.

If you wish, you can prepare the space by lighting a candle, playing soothing music, and placing some mementos nearby.

Have a box of Kleenex close to where you will be sitting.

Have writing instruments (pens and colored pencils) and blank paper ready. If you are uncomfortable writing using a pen and paper, the letter can be typed in a Word document.

Have your cell phone, land-line phone, tablet, and laptop or desktop computer turned off or on silent mode not vibrate.

Begin your letter with Dear...

Managing Triggers and Life Markers

Although there is no prescribed timeline for grief to end, many perinatal loss experiencers may find that their grief evolves over time. Much like a scar that remains after an injury, a part of your grief will likely stay with you for the rest of your life. The grieving process will be marked with ups and downs, but it is important to be aware of and even plan for days when your grief may intensify.

There are some occasions when perinatal loss experiencers feel the weight of their loss more intensely. For example, Mother's Day is often a trigger for women who have had a miscarriage or stillbirth because it is a day that serves as an acute reminder of who and what has been lost. In addition, some people in your support circle may not know how to behave on Mother's Day. In particular, the lack of acknowledgement for childless women who have suffered a miscarriage or stillbirth on Mother's Day can be extremely hurtful because it minimizes the significance of the baby that was lost and the grief that remains.

Special occasions or life markers that may be grief triggers for perinatal loss experiencers include:

- Mothers Day
- Father's Day
- Anniversary of loss
- Special holidays such as Valentines Day, Halloween, Family Day
- Religious holidays such as Christmas, Easter, Hanukah, Ramadan, Chinese New Year, Diwali, and others
- Future pregnancies

It is important to be mindful of some strategies that can help you get through special occasions or life makers that are grief triggers.

- Plan a ritual to memorialize your loss on the special occasion such as visit the grave site, light a candle, hang a symbolic wreath on your front door, or complete one of the other rituals listed in the restorative ritual section of this workbook.
- Give yourself permission to cry if tears come
- Give yourself permission to laugh if you want to laugh
- Ask for extra support from loved ones in your support circle
- Give yourself permission to not celebrate or take time out if you need it

Healing with Gentle Self-Care

Self-care is a foundational practice that can assist you in healing your grief. Self-care is not about being selfish, but it helps to balance out the care you give to others with your need to care for yourself. Think about the announcement that you hear each time you fly on an airplane: “put your own oxygen mask on first before assisting others”.

Like grief, self-care is holistic and should be addressed on a physical, emotional, psychological, social, and spiritual level. While it can feel like a tremendous effort just to survive after perinatal loss, it is especially important to take gentle care of yourself during the mourning process.

Emotional Self-Care

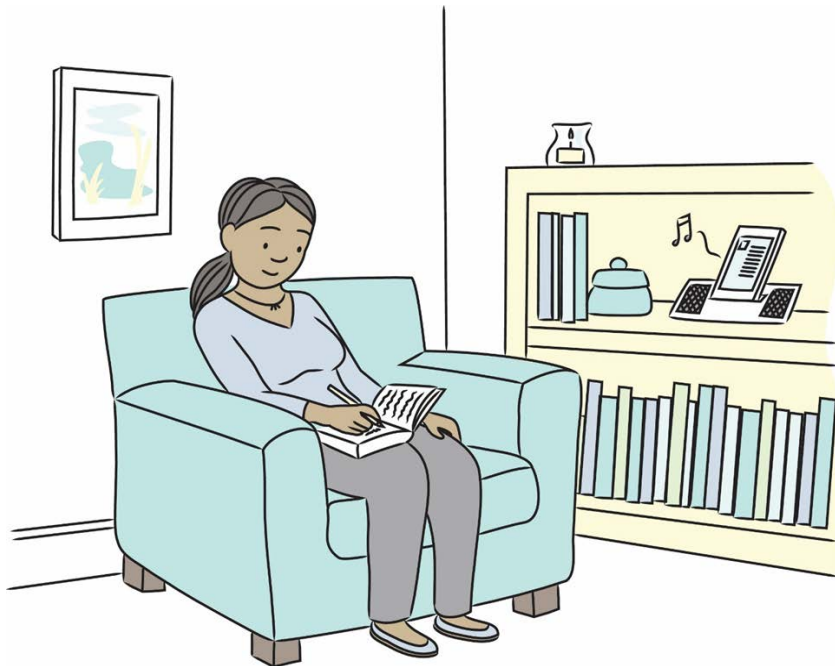


Illustration reproduced/adapted with permission from the Best Start Resource Centre

Journal writing is an exploratory writing process that helps to uncover your innermost thoughts and feelings. Journal writing provides a safe place to uncover the intense and complex grief reactions associated with loss.

Journaling allows you to digest your loss experience, process your grief, and adapt to your loss through contemplation and reflection that leads to a release of painful emotions and

thoughts which surface during perinatal bereavement ¹². Journaling can open the door to a path of self-awareness, self-discovery, and intuitive wisdom.

Case Example:

After multiple miscarriages and eventually infertility, Joy reflected on her experience with journaling during the grieving process:

“For me, journaling directed my grief energy in a positive direction. I could articulate every thought and feeling. I must preface this with saying, I didn’t want to journal, but I knew I had to journal. I suggest you gently make this a must on your self-care list. It was difficult because I was emotionally raw, and journaling made me face the pain that was inside. But like physical exercise, you feel better afterward. Over time, the feeling better part stuck with me...”

Listening to music can also be a powerful way to connect with your emotions. Try playing soothing music while you journal to enhance the experience.

Social Self-Care

Social support had been identified as an extremely important factor for women who have had a miscarriage or stillbirth ¹³. It is important to have supportive people that you can talk to about your loss. Since perinatal loss experiencers often experience a lack of social validation for their loss, it may be important to find new avenues of support such as support groups, a grief counsellor, and social media groups. Please refer to the list of perinatal loss websites and support groups on page 33 for details.

Physical Self-Care

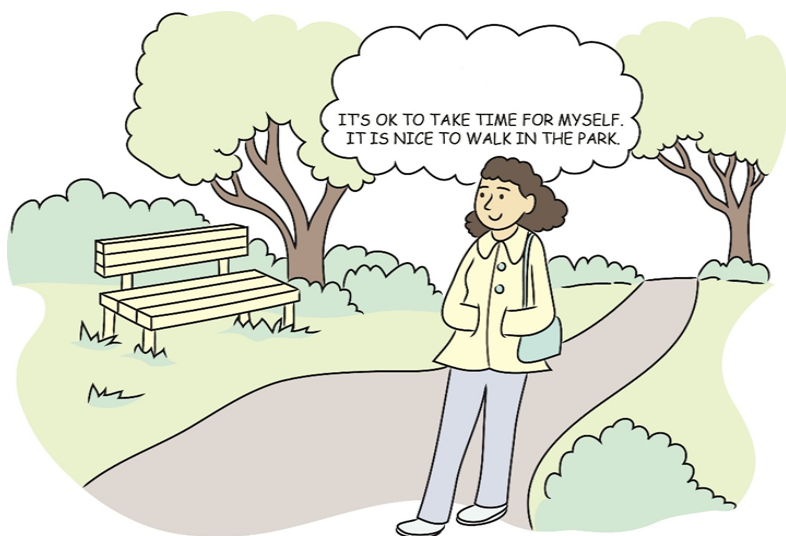


Illustration reproduced/adapted with permission from the Best Start Resource Centre

It is well established that exercise can improve mood and reduce stress. Grieving and adjusting to your loss can be stressful and draining. Taking time out to commune with nature can be therapeutic. While you are

grieving, building exercise into your day in the form of a nature walks or any movement that you enjoy can be healing. For detailed information on the types of exercise and how much exercise your body requires, please refer to [Canada's Physical Activity Guidelines](#).

Whenever possible, nourish your body with minimally processed whole foods such as fruits, vegetables, grains, protein, dairy products, and healthy fats like nuts, seeds, fatty fish, avocado, olive oil, coconut oil, and grass-fed butter. In recent years, scientific research has explored the connection between diet and mood, and determined that there is a link between nutrition and our mental health. During perinatal bereavement, there is a greater risk of developing mood or anxiety disorders¹⁴. For this reason, nutrition is even more important at this time. There is a tendency to crave carbohydrates that are high in sugar and fat when we are feeling angry, sad, depressed, or despair. Example of these foods would be potato chips, chocolate, ice cream, and baked goods like cookies, cake, or brownies. Ironically, while these foods can feel comforting while you enjoy them, they actually can lead to fatigue, mood changes, and a

depressed mood ¹⁵. Bearing this in mind, please use [Canada's Food Guide](#) to learn detailed information about what kind of food and how much food your body needs for your age.

In addition to nutrition and movement, ensuring that you get adequate rest is also very important during perinatal bereavement. Many bereaved moms are already sleep deprived because of sleep disturbance during pregnancy. After perinatal loss, bereaved moms are also at risk for sleep disturbance. Try practicing focused breathing to relax before sleeping. The [sleep health foundation](#) provides informative sleep tips on for getting more rest; please visit their website for more information.

Psychological Self-Care

During perinatal bereavement, you may be feeling of anxious, scattered, and overwhelmed. Focused breathing can help! Practicing focused breathing can help to reduce anxiety, promote relaxation, and improve your ability to problem solve. When you become anxious, you may have noticed that your breathing becomes more rapid and shallow. Focused breathing is about slowing down the breath and breathing from your diaphragm. When you breathe deeply, you should notice your belly rising and falling rather than your chest. Focused breathing helps to reset your state of mind and breathing; focused breathing is very versatile as it can be used at anytime or anywhere.

- Sit in a comfortable position with your back relaxed but straight.
- Rest your feet on the floor to feel the ground supporting you.
- If it is safe to do so, close your eyes to block out your environment.
- Take a slow deep breath in through your nose and hold it for 3 seconds then slowly release your breath through your mouth like you are blowing out a candle.

- Repeat this cycle 2 to 5 more times.

Caution: if you are practicing focused breathing while driving or in transit, do not close your eyes.

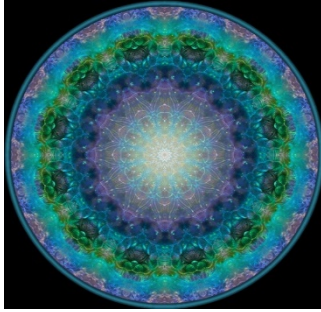
Spiritual Self-Care

Spiritual self-care involves connecting with your spirit on regularly through prayer, mindfulness practices, singing, dance, religious service attendance, and much more. Mindfulness has risen in popularity in recent years because it helps to promote self-compassion, self-awareness, stress-reduction, and the ability to manage emotions more effectively. The term mindfulness refers to the ability to deliberately focus your attention on the present moment using an observational approach with a spirit of openness and curiosity, but no judgment ¹⁶.

Mindfulness practices are a great coping tool and they include yoga, meditation, focused breathing, and much more. According to Dr. Kait Philbin, a registered yoga therapist, “yoga can help relieve suffering during the grieving process” ¹⁷. If you have not tried yoga, consider taking a class through a community recreation program.

Additionally, some hospice societies, counselling agencies, and community service agencies offer mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) courses as part of their bereavement support programs or stress management programming. MBSR can teach you skills to cope with grief, anxiety, and stress. Try completing a Google search on MBSR classes in your area to see if this service is offered.

Grief Activity: Mandala Drawing



Mandalas are considered sacred circles that allow for contemplation and inner exploration which promotes healing. Mandala drawing can be an important part of processing your grief.

Image Source:
<http://www.lightweaver.com/free/mandalas2.h>

Instructions:

Find a quiet place where you can contemplate and draw undisturbed

Place some blank paper in front of you and a large assortment of colored pencils or crayons

Close your eyes and sit quietly for a few moments

Open your eyes and let a color choose you. Go with the color that first stands out to you.

Draw a circle

Fill in the circle with shapes and colors allowing your intuition to guide the process. Do not rush the process, just listen and allow the mandala to unfold.

After 15 to 20 minutes, stop drawing and observe your creation

On the back of your drawing page, write down any emotions and thoughts that stand out during the process of mandala drawing.

Resources: Recommended reading

Books on Miscarriage

A Silent Sorrow: Pregnancy Loss-- Guidance and Support for You and Your Family by Ingrid Kohn, Perry-Lynn Moffitt, Isabelle A. Wilkins. Routledge (2000).

An Empty Cradle, a Full Heart: Reflections for Mothers and Fathers After Miscarriage, Stillbirth, or Infant Death by Christine O'Keeffe Lafser. Loyola Pres (1998).

Empty Arms: Coping with Miscarriage, Stillbirth and Infant Death by Sherokee Ilse. Wintergreen Press (1992).

Empty Arms: Hope and Support for Those Who Have Suffered a Miscarriage, Stillbirth, or Tubal Pregnancy by Pam Vredevelt. Multnomah (2001).

Empty Cradle: Surviving the Death of Your Baby by Deborah L. Davis. Fulcrum Publishing (2016).

I Never Held You: Miscarriage, Grief, Healing and Recovery by Ellen M. DuBois. Createspace Independent Publishing Platform (2006).

Healing Your Grieving Heart After Miscarriage: 100 Practical Ideas for Parents and Families by Alan D. Wolfelt PhD. Companion Press (2015).

Miscarriage: Women Sharing from the Heart by Marie Allen & Shelly Marks. Wiley (1993).

Books on Stillbirth

An Empty Cradle, a Full Heart: Reflections for Mothers and Fathers After Miscarriage, Stillbirth, or Infant Death by Christine O'Keeffe Lafser. Loyola Pres (1998).

Empty Arms: Coping with Miscarriage, Stillbirth and Infant Death by Sherokee Ilse. Wintergreen Press (1992).

Empty Arms: Hope and Support for Those Who Have Suffered a Miscarriage, Stillbirth, or Tubal Pregnancy by Pam Vredevelt. Multnomah (2001).

Empty Cradle: Surviving the Death of Your Baby by Deborah L. Davis. Fulcrum Publishing (2016).

Healing Your Grieving Heart After Stillbirth: 100 Practical Ideas for Parents and Families by Alan D. Wolfelt PhD. Companion Press (2013).

Stillbirth, Yet Still Born: Grieving and Honoring Your Precious Baby's Life by Deborah L. Davis. Fulcrum Publishing (2014).

They Were Stillborn by Janel Atlas. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers (2014).

When Hello Means Goodbye by Pat Schwiebert. Grief Watch (2010).

Books on Loss and Beyond

Colors of Loss and Healing: An Adult Coloring Book for Getting Through Tough Times by Deborah S. Derman Ph.D. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform (2016).

Pregnancy After a Loss by Carol Cirulli Lanham. Berkley (1999).

Resources: Websites

Websites for Perinatal Loss

[A Place to Remember](#)

[Centering Corporation and Grief Digest Magazine](#)

[Faces of Loss, Faces of Hope](#)

[First Candle](#)

[Healing Hearts: Baby Loss Comfort](#)

[HopeXchange](#)

[Honored Babies](#)

[Marlon & Tobias](#)

[October 15- Pregnancy and Infant Loss Awareness Day](#)

[Pregnancy and Infant Loss Network](#)

[Remembering Our Babies October 15th](#)

[Reproductive Mental Health](#)

[Share: Pregnancy and Infant Loss Support](#)

[Standing Still Mag- Handbook to Surviving the Loss of a Child](#)

[Unspoken Grief](#)

Websites for stillbirth

[First Candle](#)

[Still Life Canada](#)

[Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep](#)

Websites for Miscarriage

[Miscarriage Association](#)

Resources: Support Groups in BC

[Abbotsford Hospice Society](#) (For Stillbirth and Miscarriage)

[Empty Cradle](#) (For Stillbirth and Miscarriage)

[Still Life Canada](#) (For Stillbirth)

[The Compassionate Friends of Canada](#) (For Stillbirth)

[BC Childloss Support Network](#) (Facebook Group)

Resources: 10 Free Apps

1. [Stop, Breath, & Think](#)- after completing a mental, emotional and physical check-in, this app customizes activities to help you feel calmer, less stressed and more relaxed.
2. [MindShift](#)- anxiety management app- check out the “chill out tools”
3. [Smiling Mind](#)- mindfulness app
4. [Head Space](#)- meditation app
5. [GPS4Soul](#)- stress management app
6. [Take a Break](#)- 7-minute work break & 13-minute stress relief app
7. [Grief Support Network](#)- grief forums, blog, & grief information
8. [Cove](#)- music journal app
9. [Calm](#)- mindfulness app
10. [Breathe](#)- focused breathing app

References

1. Sejourne, N., Callahan, S., & Chabrol, H. (2010). Support following miscarriage: What women want. *Journal of Reproductive & Infant Psychology*, 28(4), 403-411. doi: 10.1080/02646830903487375
2. Lang, A., Fleischer, A. R., Duhamel, F., Sword, W., Gilbert, K. R., & Corsini-Munt, S. (2011). Perinatal Loss and Parental Grief: The Challenge of Ambiguity and Disenfranchised Grief. *Omega: Journal of Death & Dying*, 63(2), 183-196. doi:10.2190/OM.63.2.e
3. Kersting, A., & Wagner, B. (2012). Complicated grief after perinatal loss. *Dialogues in clinical neuroscience*, 14(2), 187-194. Retrieved from <http://www.dialogues-cns.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/DialoguesClinNeurosci-14-187.pdf>
4. Randolph, A. L., Hruby, B. T., & Sharif, S. (2015). Counseling Women Who Have Experienced Pregnancy Loss: A Review of the Literature. *Adultspan Journal*, 14(1), 2-10. doi: 10.1002/j.2161-0029.2015.00032.x
5. Koopmans, L., Wilson, T., Cacciatore, J., & Flenady, V. (2013). Support for mothers, fathers and families after perinatal death. *The Cochrane Library*. doi: 10.1002/14651858.CD000452.pub2
6. Worden, J. W. (2009). *Grief counseling and grief therapy: A handbook for the mental health practitioner*. New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company.
7. Doka, K.J. (2002). Preface. In K. J. Doka (Ed.), *Disenfranchised grief: New directions, challenges, and strategies for practice* (pp. xiii – xv). Champaign, IL: Research Press.
8. Fenstermacher, K., & Hupcey, J. E. (2013). Perinatal bereavement: A principle-based concept analysis. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 69(11), 2389-2400. doi:10.1111/jan.12119
9. McCoyd, J. L. M., & Walter, C. A. (2016). *Grief and loss across the lifespan: A biopsychosocial perspective*. New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company
10. Wolfelt, A. D. (2014). *The depression of grief: Coping with your sadness and knowing when to get help*. Fort Collins, CO: Companion Press.

11. Kobler, K., Limbo, R., & Kavanaugh, K. (2007). Meaningful moments: The use of ritual in perinatal and pediatric death. *MCN: The American Journal of Maternal/Child Nursing*, 32(5), 288-295. Retrieved from http://www.nursingcenter.com/cearticle?an=00005721-200709000-00006&Journal_ID=54021&Issue_ID=737867
12. Winokuer, H. R. (2012). Experiencing the pain of grief. In R.A., Neimeyer (Ed.). *Techniques of grief therapy: Creative practices for counseling the bereaved* (pp. 33 -35). New York, NY: Routledge
13. Cacciatore, J. (2012). Psychological effects of stillbirth. *Seminars in Fetal and Neonatal Medicine*, 18(2), 76-82. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.siny.2012.09.0010391-1>
14. Davision, K. (2016). Managing mood: Using nutrition interventions. Retrieved from [file:///C:/Users/Judy/Downloads/ManagingMoodwithDiet_slides%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/Judy/Downloads/ManagingMoodwithDiet_slides%20(1).pdf)
15. Berkowitz, V. (2015). The Carbohydrate Cascade into Depression. Retrieved from <https://valerieberkowitz.wordpress.com/tag/depression/>
16. Roberts, L. R., & Montgomery, S. B. (2016). Mindfulness-based Intervention for Perinatal Grief Education and Reduction among Poor Women in Chhattisgarh, India: A pilot Study. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Best Practices in Global Development*, 2(1), 1- 26. Retrieved from <http://knowledge.e.southern.edu/ijbpgd/vol2/iss1/1/>
17. Philbin, K. (2009). Transpersonal integrative yoga therapy: a protocol for grief and bereavement. *International Journal of Yoga Therapy*, 19(1), 129-141. Retrieved from <http://drkaitphilbin.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/IJYT-2009-Philbin.pdf>

Coping with Perinatal Loss: A Self-help Skills Resource for Women Seeking Support After Miscarriage or Stillbirth validates the significance of perinatal loss and provides helpful coping strategies and resources to assist in grief processing to promote healing.

Copies of this workbook can be downloaded at no cost from:

Sacredcirclecounselling.com

Judith Arthur, M.A. Psych, R.C.C, R.D., is a registered dietitian and registered clinical counsellor specializing in perinatal loss, grief and bereavement support, the food-mood connection, and depression. She is the founder of **Sacred Circle Counselling** and provides therapy focused on issues unique to women. The mission of Sacred Circle Counselling is to assist women on their journey to wholeness.



Sacredcirclecounselling.com