



Coping with Traumatic Grief After Pregnancy Loss

An unintended loss of pregnancy is a difficult journey that can cause physical and emotional stress, and special care needs to be given during this process to look after a woman's emotional well-being. In the process of losing a pregnancy, a woman may have experienced immense physical stress such as intense cramps, heavy bleeding and/or intrusive medical procedures. These physical experiences could be accompanied with feelings of shock and confusion. Feelings of grief and loss could also arise, which could be emotionally stressful. In the immediate days and weeks following a pregnancy loss, a woman could also likely experience a variety of emotions, ranging from disbelief and sadness to guilt and anxiety about future pregnancies.





What is traumatic grief?

Apart from grief, some women may experience traumatic grief. A traumatic event is a frightening and dangerous experience that poses actual or perceived threat to her life or body. In the process of a pregnancy loss, some women may be exposed to intrusive medical procedures and in some cases face life-threatening situations. When exposed to these experiences, an individual could develop symptoms of traumatic stress. In addition, when the grief experienced is accompanied by post-traumatic stress symptoms, it is known as traumatic grief.

A woman who has been experiencing traumatic grief may feel very fearful, anxious or stressed when she encounters memories or reminders of the pregnancy (even positive ones). She may also avoid places, situations, people, thoughts or conversations that remind her of the pregnancy loss. Other symptoms of traumatic grief may include:

- Intrusive, repetitive thoughts or memories of the terrifying details of the pregnancy loss or medical procedures
- Nightmares or flashbacks of the event that might have caused it
- Excessive focus on reminders of the pregnancy loss
- Hypervigilance, being easily startled or having excessive fears about the subsequent pregnancies
- Intense feelings of bitterness, sorrow or anger related the pregnancy loss
- Excessive guilt or self-blame about how the pregnancy ended
- Feelings of numbness, detachment or hopelessness
- Loss of self-confidence
- Other physical and emotional symptoms such as increased physical aches, irritability, anxiety and difficulties in sleeping or concentrating





Traumatic grief can make it difficult to think about as well as grieve the loss of the baby and cope with changes that result from the pregnancy loss. These reactions may sometimes affect how a woman functions at work or school and may affect relationships with family members and friends. It can feel challenging to manage and may affect their overall quality of life.

When should you consider seeking support?

Some signs that a woman may benefit from further professional support can include:

- Persistent traumatic grief symptoms listed above for more than **one month** after the pregnancy loss
- Difficulties in carrying out usual routines and tasks at home, work or school, and/or impact on relationships with family and friends due to the symptoms
- Difficulties in caring for or bonding with other children and/or family members
- Having thoughts of harming or killing oneself, and/or hurting other people
- Using alcohol, drugs, and/or engaging in risky sexual behaviours to cope
- Repeated observations or concerns expressed by loved ones that you may not be coping well

If you are experiencing ongoing symptoms of traumatic grief, receiving early and appropriate treatment can help you get back to enjoying the activities and relationships that are important to you, in addition to improving your overall well-being.





Where can you seek professional support from?

A professional trained in grief and trauma work can help you learn to manage traumatic memories, reminders and responses, by working through changes in your thoughts and beliefs associated with the death. This helps to reduce the effects of traumatic stress symptoms, so that you are better able to process any remaining feelings and thoughts arising from your loss, while gradually reconnecting with others around you.

For subsidised treatment options, consider speaking with your polyclinic doctor or general practitioner (GP) for a referral to a psychiatrist and/or psychologist in restructured hospitals. You may also wish to consider seeking out private psychiatrists or psychologists, without needing a referral.

If you are currently seeing a psychiatrist or medical doctor at KKH, they can refer you to the **KKH Psychosocial Trauma Support Service (PTSS)**. PTSS consists of a team of clinical psychologists who specialises in providing psychological trauma assessment and interventions for women and children. These forms of support can help them to better cope with the after-effects of traumatic experiences.

