

SUFFERING in SILENCE

Women devastated by pregnancy loss too often feel they can't share their grief



CJ FAIRFIELD
Staff Writer

Michelle Freeman became a member of a club she never wanted to join. It's a growing club of which no woman wants to be a part.

The night before her first ultrasound, in January 2020, she felt what she described as a

rubber band snap on the left side of her abdomen. At her ultrasound the next day, she was told there was no heartbeat.

She was nine-and-a-half weeks pregnant. She wanted the baby so badly, and in an instant it was gone.

According to the March of

Dimes, a nonprofit that focuses on the health of mothers and babies, 10% to 15% of all pregnancies end in loss.

"All I wanted to do was crawl into a hole, and I wanted to crawl into a hole with someone who could hold me, and there was nobody who could," said Freeman, 42, who grew up in Ventnor and now lives in Manhattan. "I felt very vacant, like I was a shell of a person."

That night, she stood in the shower sobbing uncontrollably, praying everything would be OK. But in the back of

A three-part series on breaking the stigma of talking about pregnancy loss.

MONDAY: A mother reveals her miscarriage after 53 years.

TUESDAY: The shadow of secrecy around miscarriages and its accompanying grief is slowly starting to fade — but asking for help can still be daunting.

See **MISCARRIAGE**, A4

VIDEO ONLINE

Local women discuss their miscarriages and how talking about it with others helped them grieve.

[PressofAC.com](https://www.pressofac.com).

MISCARRIAGE

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FREEMAN

her mind, she knew the pregnancy was over.

"I was doubled over in the shower

begging for my baby to be OK," she said. "That to me was easier to deal with than the idea of my baby not being there. I had started the mourning process even though I didn't even realize it."

Not long after, she learned an aunt had previously suffered a miscarriage, and so did another aunt. Her grandmother. Her own mom.

"All of these people suddenly told me that they had had one," she said. "If I had known in any point in my life that my mother, my grandmother, my aunt, my other aunt, this friend, that friend, the other friend ... that they had a miscarriage before I was

THE NUMBERS ON MISCARRIAGES

10% to 15% of pregnancies before 20 weeks end in miscarriage

1% to 5% of pregnancies after 20 weeks end in miscarriage

1 out of 100 women will have repeat miscarriages

75% of women who have repeat miscarriages have an unknown cause

65% of women who have repeat miscarriages will go on to have a successful pregnancy

Source: March of Dimes

born, before we became friends, before we were associated with each other, I would have called and said, 'I need help processing this. How did you handle it?'"

The staggering frequency of miscarriages can come as a surprise to some, and experts say it's not talked about enough.

But what's even less talked about is the emotional and mental suffering a woman goes through after she experiences the loss. Due to the lack of conversation around miscarriages and grief, she harbors those emotions and continues to suffer in silence. But she is never alone in her grief.

Finding strength in sharing



COTTRELL

For Amanda Cottrell, some days are harder than others. The 31-year-old from Egg Harbor Township lost her son, Judah, at 22 weeks pregnant in June.

"I almost couldn't believe what I was hearing," she said when the doctor said there was no heartbeat at her ultrasound appointment. "I felt like I was in a fog, like a dream."

To help with her grief, she made a video of her and her husband's journey, from when they were married in early 2020 to when they lost Judah.

She posted the video to Facebook and YouTube and immediately received a flood of comments from women sharing their own stories.

A miscarriage is the

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MICHELLE FREEMAN

Who grew up in Ventnor and suffered a miscarriage at 9½ weeks

loss of a baby before the 20th week of pregnancy, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. A stillbirth is loss of a baby at or after 20 weeks.

It happens to more women than we think, experts say. It happens to our mothers, our aunts, cousins, friends, sisters.

The Monday after Freeman's procedure she went back to work but felt numb. A few coworkers expressed their condolences, but most didn't want to poke or prod into her personal life.

And while Freeman understood that boundary, she felt that if no one asked, it felt like it didn't really happen.

"It was almost like, 'Oh, she showed up to work so she must be OK,'" she said. "This was the hardest 'fake it till you make it' experience I ever had to go through. You fake the smile, you go through the motions, but mentally you're not there."

She started researching how to deal with a miscarriage and what causes them. She soon discovered she wasn't alone.

She called her best friend in California to tell her about the miscarriage. She had yet to tell her she was even pregnant. Her friend then opened up about her own miscarriage, which Freeman had never known.

She wished she would have known sooner. It would have been one more person she could have turned to.

"If I had been able to gather a support network of friends and family who had gone through it, I could have called and said, 'I'm struggling mentally and I can't stop crying.' I think it would have helped my healing process a whole lot more," she said. "People keep this so close to the chest

when it would be so incredibly helpful to know other women's stories."

Uncomfortable but important talks

There are a multitude of reasons why women don't openly speak about their miscarriage and the grief and loneliness that comes with it, experts say.

One of the most common reasons is guilt. Both Cottrell and Freeman, at one point, blamed themselves for the loss.

Did they stress too much? Did they reach too high on a shelf? Did they overeat at a party? Was it the lack of sleep? Did they drink too much? Did they eat something they shouldn't have?

"All you want is an answer as to why," Freeman said.

With that, they start to second guess themselves, said Joey Miller, a Chicago-based psychotherapist who specializes in reproductive psychology, loss and trauma and women's mental health. She also is the author of "Rebirth, The Journey of Pregnancy After a Loss."

"It's not, 'My body failed.' It's, 'I failed,'" Miller said.

Another reason there's a stigma around talking about miscarriage is because it's uncomfortable.

"People don't like to talk about death, at all," said Ann Coyle, manager of Perinatal Bereavement Programs at Virtua Health in Voorhees.

"That's the problem in society. That is the one guarantee in life — that we're all going to die. No one wants to think about the death of a child or a baby because it's just unfathomable."

While experts say advancements in women's health, grief support and talking about uncomfortable topics, such as losing a pregnancy, are better, there's still much to be done and steps that need to be taken to get where we need to be.

"We've come a long way," Coyle said. "But we still have a long way to go."

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“It’s been a topic that’s so uncomfortable to people. Our instinct is to say, ‘Oh that’s very sad, so what are we having for dinner?’ and move right on. We move right on to the rest of living, but the loss is part of living.”

PATRICIA JAGGIE, Retired labor and delivery nurse who suffered a miscarriage in 1976



MATTHEW STRABUK / FOR THE PRESS

Dr. Ronald Librizzi, a recently retired physician who worked in fetal medicine for 40 years at Jefferson University Hospital and Virtua Health System, says there’s a philosophy out there that if you don’t talk about the grief a miscarriage brings that it’s just going to go away, which is wrong.

Breaking the stigma

‘I guess I thought that this is something you don’t talk about’
Some of the reasons why we don’t talk about miscarriages



EDWARD LEA / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Patricia Jaggie is a retired labor and delivery nurse who had a miscarriage in 1976. In her yard is a pathway that leads to a heart-shaped stone that says ‘Tho Our Arms Never Held You ... Our Hearts Always Will,’ to honor her miscarriages and the miscarriages her daughters had.

CJ FAIRFIELD
Staff Writer

It was an Easter Sunday she will never forget. She lost her baby. She was 22. It was 1967.

“I started to bleed a lot,” she said. “I wouldn’t say I was hemorrhaging on the floor, but I knew something was wrong.”

She’s now 76, but the memory is so vivid.

“It was not only very frightening, but heartbreaking,” she said. “I felt empty and a bit guilty as if I had done something wrong.”

Miscarriage is more common than we think. In fact, 10% to 20% of all pregnancies will end in loss, yet there is still somewhat of a

See **STIGMA**, A4

A three-part series on breaking the stigma of talking about pregnancy loss.

TUESDAY: *The shadow of secrecy around miscarriage and its accompanying grief is slowly starting to fade — but asking for help can still be daunting.*

ONLINE

Read the first story in this series and watch video interviews with local women who discuss their miscarriages at PressofAC.com.



EDWARD LEA / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

From left, Sophia Schaefer 6, Amanda Cottrell, 31, Isabella Schaefer, 11, Christopher Cottrell, 30, and Olivea Schaefer, 12, at their home in Egg Harbor Township. Isabella is holding the urn that has the cremated remains of Amanda's son Judah that Amanda lost at 21 weeks pregnant.

Changing the conversation

More support available as women begin to talk about the sorrow of a miscarriage

The last of a three-part series on breaking the stigma of talking about pregnancy loss.

ONLINE

Read the first two stories in this series and watch video interviews with local women who discuss their miscarriages at PressofAC.com.

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Helen Goddard, 79, of Absecon, suffered her first miscarriage in 1965. She was 24.

"I had wanted a baby so badly," she said.

She had two more miscarriages but eventually gave birth to two sons. When she had her miscarriages, she spoke about them to her husband, her parents and brother.

She's also told her two

sons, once they were old enough, about the losses.

"But I grieve still," she said.

For her birthday this year in January, she was supposed to get a dog but received a letter from the breeder that the dog had died at five weeks old.

"That's like a miscarriage," she said, holding back tears. "I felt sad. I do feel sad. I feel sad that the dog died. It brings up

See **CONVERSATION**, A2

"People will say all the wrong things, because they don't know

what to say. But if they don't tell anyone, then it's truly suffering in silence. There's good and bad on both sides."



ANN COYLE

Manager of Perinatal Bereavement Programs at Virtua Health

CONVERSATION

Continued from A1

loses that I had.”

But she finds it therapeutic to talk about all the losses she’s experienced.

Patricia Jaggie and Amanda Cottrell feel the same. Jaggie, 71, of Gallop Township, suffered a miscarriage in 1976. Cottrell, 31, of Egg Harbor Township, suffered a miscarriage this past June.

Jaggie has found that, through all of these years, it’s a gift to share with her children and grandchildren.

“It is part of their life and their existence,” she said. “Sadly, tragedy is a part of our existence, but resilience is part of human nature. I think that if I carried that sadness with me all throughout my 71 years, it would be a much heavier burden. Now I look at it and think in some ways I was given a gift in that I was able to share.”

Cottrell, who has three daughters, cremated Judah, her son she lost at 21 weeks pregnant. His remains are in a

small, wooden urn that sits atop a shelf in her home. He is very much a part of the family.

“We took a family photo and we had his little (urn) with us,” she said. “On Christmas morning the girls were opening presents and they pulled over his little box and had him sit on the floor with us. It’s all really comfortable.”

For Cottrell, she’s found it helpful to share her story on Facebook. She hopes it can help another woman who experiences a loss.

“I feel healing in talking about it to people,” she said. “We definitely have a really strong community. We’re not hiding it. I make it known that I have another kid, he’s just not here.”

Ann Coyle, manager of Perinatal Bereavement Programs at Virtua Health, said social media has played a part with different support groups that help women come together to share experiences and ideas.

Coyle runs two different support groups, one for pregnancy and infant loss and the other for rainbow babies, which is

a pregnancy after a loss.

“Women are extremely nervous during their next pregnancy and think that something’s going to go wrong, so we support them throughout that pregnancy,” she said.

The question of when to announce a pregnancy is very individual, experts say. If women don’t announce a pregnancy and they lose it, then they don’t have to announce the loss, again possibly suffering with grief in silence. But experts say they have seen a shift in women being more open with their grief.

“People will say all the wrong things, because they don’t know what to say,” Coyle said. “But if they don’t tell anyone, then it’s truly suffering in silence. There’s good and bad on both sides.”

But today, women can better educate themselves with the help of the internet and finding resources, experts say. They’re more open about loss because it’s easier to find help, and support, than it was 50 years ago.

“I wouldn’t trust Dr. Google all the way, but

(women) are starting to advocate a lot for themselves,” Coyle said.

Nicole DeCicco, nurse manager of maternal child health at Shore Medical Center in Somers Point, said the conversation around miscarriage is getting better because society has become more transparent.

“It’s more acceptable to talk about everything,” she said. “This is good, because it makes women feel less isolated.”

DeCicco, who suffered her own miscarriage at 23 weeks, said acknowledging other people’s emotions, and not dismissing them, has become the social norm.

The medical community is helping break the stigma of suffering in silence, as well.

At Shore, a policy change that went into effect in early 2020 admits women who suffered a miscarriage after 15 weeks into the Maternal Child Health floor. If it’s less than 15 weeks, the maternal health team comes to the patient in the emergency or operating rooms. Patients no longer have to be cared for solely in

the emergency room by emergency room staff.

Not only should we support women in their grief, we should also seek to educate and support medical professionals to have those conversations with their patients, said Joey Miller, a Chicago-based psychotherapist who specializes in reproductive psychology, trauma and loss.

While not every obstetrician should become a psychotherapist, she said it’s key for them to point women to resources and to let them know they’re not alone.

“A women’s grief usually outweighs and outlasts the depth and duration of society’s sympathy,” she said. “We need to continue to be present in the days and the weeks following the loss, when these women really hit rock bottom, to start putting the pieces back together. And the pieces won’t exactly fit like they did before.”

A quick internet search generates dozens of support groups both nationally and regionally showing how accessible help can be in 2021.

Miller’s biggest mes-

sage is there is life beyond loss and that women can heal. Experts all agree that the best support one can give to a woman grieving a loss is to just listen.

“Sometimes sitting with the hard truth and giving our presence and our unconditional support is one of the greatest gifts we can offer,” she said. “As uncomfortable as people are around that woman, the reality is there is no one more uncomfortable than her. She just lost her baby. There is nothing we can do to fix or to change that, and sometimes we just need to acknowledge that.”

On Valentine’s Day, Cottrell found out she was expecting again. She’s excited, nervous and scared, but refuses to live in fear.

Her rainbow baby will never replace Judah.

“No matter how far along you are, a miscarriage is a miscarriage. It’s equally devastating,” she said. “Judah’s name is a name that will always be signed on a card.”

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