

Women need more time to grieve miscarriage

What you need to know: Miscarriages are common and occur in about one in five pregnancies. Women who miscarry may feel grief, guilt and anger even years after the loss. While this emotional distress may continue for some time, women who have miscarried are not at greater risk of depression than other women. This research highlights the importance of distinguishing between grief reactions and anxiety or depression following miscarriage, and the need for families and health professionals to support women and give them time to grieve.

What is this research about?

Miscarriage (early pregnancy loss) happens in about one in five pregnancies. Grief is common after miscarriage but it is not clear whether women who have miscarriages are at greater risk of depression than women who do not. Most studies about women's mental health after miscarriage are based on very small numbers of women, or only include women who attend a hospital for their miscarriage. Our study used data from the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health (ALSWH), a large study of more than 50,000 Australian women, to explore the mental health of young women who had had miscarriages.

What did the researchers do?

We used data collected through questionnaires and interviews to better understand women's emotional reactions to miscarriage. Using information collected from questionnaires with over 8,000 young women in the ALSWH, we compared the mental health of women who had experienced a miscarriage to women who had never experienced a miscarriage. We also conducted in-depth interviews with nine women about their experience of miscarriage and ways of coping following their loss.

What did the researchers find?

Interviews with women who had experienced miscarriage uncovered a complex mixture of grief, guilt and anger, even years after the event. However, the questionnaire data showed that women who had experienced miscarriages were not at greater risk of depression than women who had not experienced miscarriages.

Although emotional distress after miscarriage may continue for many women for some time, the difficult process of coping with feelings after a miscarriage is not a sign of mental health problems, but rather a sign of emotional strength and resilience, as they slowly learn to deal with their reactions to this upsetting life event.

How can you use this research?

It is important to distinguish between grief reactions and anxiety or depression following miscarriage. Families and health professionals need to give women the time and opportunity to grieve following pregnancy loss, before considering treatment for depression or anxiety.

Keywords: Miscarriage, pregnancy loss, mental health, depression, grief, women's health

Contact person: Dr Ingrid Rowlands. i.rowlands@psy.uq.edu.au

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