

5 Having a mentor

Is there someone in the organisation who can support a student practitioner and be a mentor? Ideally, trainees need to be able to talk with an experienced counsellor who also has the time to give to the trainee. This may involve simply checking in with the student after seeing clients, rather than requiring a huge time commitment. Trainee counsellor, Alec Morgan, explains: 'It's hard not to feel pressurised when you hear a real-life client talk about their suicidal thoughts, however well prepared you think you might be. The analogy I give to people is, it's the difference between reading what it's like to be in a room with a tiger and being face to face with the tiger. Being able to talk through these experiences with a mentor can help the process to feel more contained.'

Some university training providers have a placement co-ordinator and it's worth making a connection with this person to give you the opportunity to meet with possible applicants seeking placements, as well as to meet other mentors, to support you in the process.

6 Feeling connected

Training to become a counsellor can be an isolating experience as it is often such a process of change and transformation. Are there ways you can support your trainee? This might be inviting your student counsellor to any training you offer, or to join you at a team meal or even to spend time in other parts of the organisation to connect and understand the business. Being able to spend informal time with experienced counsellors can help a student practitioner to see that all this hard work does lead to a future career. Having more than one student practitioner may also help to reduce the sense of isolation and offer a source of mutual support.

7 Research potential

Your trainee may be required as part of their course to write a dissertation, and often the experience of working with clients on a placement provides a natural topic for further research. When I was studying for my master's, it was the experience of working for an LGBT service in the NHS that

'With the support of experienced workplace counsellors, more workplace-based placements could be offered to trainees to help nurture and develop the next generation of workplace counsellors'

provided the inspiration for my dissertation around working with BAME LGBT clients. By having a regular intake of students, the workplace sector can also benefit from a new body of research in what is a growing sector within the counselling professions.

8 Short-term and long-term clients

During training, all students will need to have experience of both short-term and long-term clients. In most workplace settings, the therapy is usually short term, eg workplace conflict or helping a client return to work after sickness. Is there scope to offer your student practitioner any long-term clients? If that's not possible, being clear about the length of client work that is on offer from the start, ensures student

counsellors are aware that they may need to find an additional placement where long-term clients are a possibility.

Closing thoughts

In writing this article, it is my hope that I might encourage service managers to think about the value of offering a trainee practitioner a placement within their counselling service. From an organisational perspective, it can help a service to see more clients, and offer a wider benefit to the profession overall, and at a personal level, it can enhance your skills as a counselling professional. During my own counselling training, it was my placement experience in the NHS that gave me the confidence in my client-facing skills to help me secure my first paid job, working in policing. It was invaluable to me and vital to my development in my career as a counsellor. With the support of experienced workplace counsellors, more workplace-based placements could be offered to trainees to help nurture and develop the next generation of workplace counsellors to their full potential. ●

With thanks to Mandy Ross and Alec Morgan, Year 2 MSc Integrative Psychotherapy students from Newman University for talking to me and giving their permission to be published in this article.

REFERENCES

- 1 Jenkins P. Professional practice in counselling and psychotherapy. London: Sage; 2017.
- 2 <https://www.bacp.co.uk/careers/careers-in-counselling/training/>



Better conversations about *When a baby dies*



What should an employer do when an employee's baby dies? **Jane Moffett** works with parents and knows what can help when the worst thing happens



Jane Moffett (MSc Coaching and Behavioural Change) is a coach and facilitator and runs parental returner coaching programmes within organisations, to ease the transition back to work after parental leave.
jane@kangaroo coaching.net

The loss of a baby – for whatever reason – is a devastating event for the family and something that, as a society, we struggle to talk about. Some women, like the comedian Lou Conran, need to terminate the life of their baby because the baby is too ill.¹ Others suffer from miscarriage, a stillbirth or experience a neonatal death (babies dying under the age of 28 days). What links all of these experiences, is the loss of life and visions of a future with their child and, in many cases, the parents also suffer from people around them not acknowledging their loss, not mentioning the baby and, in some cases, avoiding them entirely. Like other bereavements, those grieving might go through a mixture of emotions, including anger, denial, low mood, a sense of longing and emptiness and they also might experience a deep sense of fatigue and exhaustion.

Miscarriage is classified as the loss of a baby aged under 24 complete weeks of gestation – and one in four pregnancies end in miscarriage – the majority of these occurring in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, while between one and two women per 100 will miscarry in weeks 12–24 of pregnancy.² Pregnancy losses that occur from 24 weeks onwards are classified as stillbirths; about one third of these happen from 37 weeks gestation and for six out of 10 stillborn babies, the cause of death is not known.³ In the UK, stillbirth and neonatal death occur in one in every 141 births – in other words, 15 babies a day die before, during or shortly after birth (equivalent to a baby dying every 90 minutes).⁴

Managers, colleagues and counsellors

Behind these sobering figures, are the parents, for whom the ramifications of these classifications

are important, because, with a miscarriage, a birth certificate is not issued and parental leave is not a statutory requirement. The result of this is that parents who lose a baby at under 24 weeks can feel that their baby is not properly acknowledged, and nor is their loss as parents. All types of baby loss are major bereavements, and having to return to work without any type of leave can be extremely hard.

As well as physical recovery for the mother, emotional recovery for both parents can be harder and take longer, so it can help if organisations can have an open mind about what individual employees might need, offering leave, signposting to counselling services and to charities that support people at this time. For managers and colleagues, simply saying 'I'm sorry', or 'I don't know what to say' can be powerful, as this acknowledges the bereavement that the parents have suffered.

The Miscarriage Association also suggests several things that could help, including sitting and listening to the parents, giving them a hug if appropriate, or helping them to seek professional help for their emotional wellbeing if they are finding this too overwhelming to do themselves.⁵

A 2018 study by Sands, the stillbirth and neonatal death charity, discovered that only 20 per cent of people knew about their employer's policies for supporting staff if their baby died, and just under a half of employers discussed entitlements to pay and leave with people following the death of their baby, with only 60 per cent of bereaved parents being offered any extended leave.⁶ The findings from this research has prompted their *Finding the words* campaign to try and improve the situation for parent employees returning to work after the loss of a baby. As the manager of someone returning to work at this time, it is important to find out your policies and initiate these discussions. Remembering that these employees are grieving, may prompt you to signpost them to counselling – the same Sands study discovered that 80 per cent of grieving parents weren't offered any kind of internal or external bereavement support.⁶

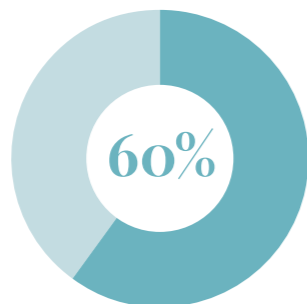
The realisation that colleagues and managers have an important role to play in easing the experience of being at work after the loss of a baby is key, as is understanding that seemingly small things can make a huge difference. It can be very hard for all of us to broach the subject of the loss of someone's baby; often, we worry that we might be saying the wrong thing, or reminding the parents of their loss when they are thinking about something else. However, so many parents say that they really need their baby and their grief to be acknowledged in this way. Abby, a mother who has written her story for the Sands website, writes: 'Say their name. It won't upset them because they are already thinking about them, it's just a reminder that you are too.'¹⁷

Between one and two women per 100 will miscarry in weeks 12–24 of pregnancy²



Pregnancy losses that occur from 24 weeks onwards are classified as stillbirths; about one third of these happen from 37 weeks gestation³

For six out of 10 stillborn babies, the cause of death is not known³



In the UK, stillbirth and neonatal death occur in one in every 141 births – in other words, 15 babies a day die before, during or shortly after birth (equivalent to a baby dying every 90 minutes)⁴

Unfortunately, talking about the baby is often not the case, as is shown by the fact that, once back at work, just under half the parents surveyed by Sands said that no-one mentioned the death of their baby.

It is also beneficial to be mindful of significant dates – in the case of miscarriage and late termination, the due date; in the case of stillbirth or neonatal death, the anniversaries of the birth and the death; Mother's Day and Father's Day. By appreciating that the employee is in a state of constant stress caused by grief, managers and colleagues can ensure that they don't exacerbate the situation by adding to workload stress – for example, quantity of work or level of responsibility at work.

For dads it can also be very hard going back to work. Unless employers offer extended paternity leave, or compassionate leave, many grieving fathers could be back in their workplace just two weeks after they have lost their baby. They might also be feeling that they need to 'be strong' and support their grieving partners. As one dad writes:

'As a man, I felt like I had to hide how heartbroken I was and had to be the strong one to look after my partner. I wouldn't tell her when I felt upset because I didn't want to upset her, but I have learnt that we are dealing with this together and have learnt to share things with her more.'⁸ Another father tells of how he suffered from a lack of support from his managers and this, combined with focusing on supporting his family, resulted in him not making his grief a priority and suffering from mental ill health several months later.⁹ For one dad, being able to talk to someone on the Sands Helpline while he was at work helped him 'to get through the difficult days.'¹⁰ However, nearly a third of dads surveyed by Sands had not been referred to a helpline or offered any bereavement support.¹¹

For women expecting another baby after the loss of a previous one, it is important to realise that this will probably heighten their stress further. As one woman wrote: 'I had counselling during my pregnancy. It was a safe place to voice my fears. I could talk freely about my stillborn daughter and not just about my bump.'¹²

What helps at work?

For the grieving employee whose baby has died, connections with work can be difficult but eased by the contact and relationships with line managers. I'd like to pass on what I know has helped other parents in the process of returning to work:

One mother whose baby died a few days after being born, described how pivotal her manager had been in making her interaction with work as good as it could be. She told him about the death of her baby and asked him to tell everybody else who needed to know at work. He remained in close contact with her during her maternity leave, managed all communications between her and work and gave her permission to return to work when, and in what capacity, she felt was right for her. Cards from close colleagues were really important too and, when she was ready to think about returning to work, she got them all out and re-read them; this recognition of the loss of her baby was key and also meant that, before returning to work, she was reminded of who had already contacted her and acknowledged her situation.

On return to work, she appreciated people mentioning her baby's death and also showing that they were pleased that she was back. Until the subject of her baby had been raised, she felt that she couldn't 'move on' in her relationship with that colleague and one of the things that helped to facilitate this conversation was having a photo of her baby on her desk, so that people were prompted to ask about him. Working with a work coach enabled her to develop a 'script', so that when the topic of her baby was raised by a colleague, she could thank them for asking about him – even if she was very upset. The coach also helped her to determine if she was ready to take on any new or extra work.

Closing thoughts

The importance of just asking, 'how are you doing?' cannot be underestimated. As one mother put it, 'This simple question meant the world.'¹³ Remembering this advice can really help when supporting a colleague or employee returning to work after the loss of their baby. Try not to be frightened to initiate a conversation with them; acknowledging their baby and their loss and asking them how they would like you to be with them, are good starting points. Accessing counselling for the grief, and coaching to help with workplace scenarios, may help them to settle back into work as best they can, developing strategies to cope with times when work and the grief could otherwise become overwhelming. ●

'Unless employers offer extended paternity leave, or compassionate leave, many grieving fathers could be back in their workplace just two weeks after they have lost their baby'

RESOURCES

The Miscarriage Association gives advice on supporting people through pregnancy loss: **t:** 01924 200799 (Monday-Friday, 9am-4pm) **e:** info@miscarriageassociation.org.uk

Sands (stillbirth and neonatal death charity) supports anyone affected by the death of a baby, working to improve the care bereaved parents receive, and promoting research to reduce the loss of babies' lives.

t: 0808 164 3332
e: helpline@sands.org.uk

Information booklets:

- Information for employers: Helping a bereaved parent return to work (Sands)
- Returning to work after the death of your baby (Sands)
- Another pregnancy? After a late miscarriage, stillbirth or neonatal death (Tommy's)
- Tommy's funds research into miscarriage, stillbirth and premature birth, and provides pregnancy health information to parents.
t: 0800 0146 800
w: https://www.tommys.org/our-organisation/help-and-support

REFERENCES

- 1 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-39885755> (accessed 16 July 2019).
- 2 <https://www.tommys.org/our-organisation/charity-research/pregnancy-statistics/miscarriage> (accessed 29 July 19).
- 3 <https://www.sands.org.uk/about-sands/baby-death-current-picture/why-babies-die> (accessed 30 July 2019).
- 4 <https://www.sands.org.uk/about-sands/baby-death-current-picture> (accessed 30 July 2019).
- 5 <https://www.miscarriageassociation.org.uk/your-feelings/supporting-someone-through-pregnancy-loss/> (accessed 16 July 2019).
- 6 <https://www.sands.org.uk/what-parents-told-us-about-bereavement-support-work> (accessed 22 July 2019).
- 7 <https://www.sands.org.uk/support/remembering-your-baby/your-stories/abbys-story> (accessed 22 July 2019).
- 8 <https://www.sands.org.uk/support/remembering-your-baby/your-stories/baby-lucas> (accessed 22 July 2019).
- 9 <https://sands.org.uk/support/remembering-your-baby/your-stories/making-my-own-grief-priority> (accessed 22 July 2019).
- 10 Sands. Returning to work after the death of your baby. London: Sands; sixth edition, 2016.
- 11 <https://www.sands.org.uk/about-sands/media-centre/news/2019/06/finding-your-way-campaign-help-men-devastated-baby-loss-reach> (accessed 30 July 2019).
- 12 Sands. Another pregnancy? After a late miscarriage, stillbirth or neonatal death. London: Sands; first edition, 2014.
- 13 <https://www.tommys.org/pregnancy-information/pregnancy-complications/baby-loss/miscarriage/miscarriage-support/supporting-someone-who-has-had-miscarriage> (accessed 30 July 2019).