



Raising awareness for pregnancy and infant loss healing

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Hayley Wilds

After her first miscarriage, Hayley Wilds was desperate to feel better as fast as possible and wanted to reassure everyone (including herself) that she was OK.

“I didn’t want to feel that pain,” said Wilds, a Pittsburgh native and resident. “I didn’t want to look at it, talk about it, or move through it. But I learned that skipping past your grief, whether you mean to or not, doesn’t help you get over your loss. If your grief isn’t expressed, and you don’t get the chance to mourn your loss, it can show up in more intense ways, and often at very inconvenient times.”

Still, she says, expressing that grief can be tough when our current culture has so few talking about it. That led her to unintentionally suppress her emotions at first. “A couple of months after my miscarriage, I went through a period where I was really irritable and angry. I didn’t really connect it to my loss until I got some news about someone’s baby shower and then the feelings overwhelmed me. I realized that I needed to do something more to tend to my grief.”

As an art therapist, Wilds had always found comfort in creative expression, so she turned to art and writing. “I journaled, I painted, and I even designed a memorial tattoo for my baby,” she recalls. “It felt good and healing to express my pain in this way. But after the birth of my rainbow baby a year later, amidst all that joy and excitement, I learned a tough lesson: grief wounds don’t go away. They stay with you, and become part of you, like tender scars that always hurt to the touch.”

Observer-Reporter

and receive validation for her experience extremely helpful.



October is Pregnancy and Infant Loss Awareness month, and Wilds wants others to learn to heal by using creative arts. An author and grief specialist, she helps parents use the arts to help parents after miscarriage. One in 4 pregnancies result in miscarriage, meaning a significant percentage of the population has been affected by this sad and often hidden grief.

Wilds, a licensed counselor, owns the Center for Creative Counseling, a private therapy practice where she specializes in pregnancy loss, maternal mental health, and grief work.

“I think there are a number of factors at play when it comes to silence and stigma around pregnancy loss,” she said. “On an individual level, because you literally carry the baby inside of your body, you may feel responsible for the loss. Scrutiny from doctors, loved ones, and your own feelings of guilt and shame after a loss can lead to stigma, being made to feel like your body ‘didn’t do what it was supposed to do’. Even if you logically know it wasn’t your fault, you might still deal with the emotional experience of a ‘failed pregnancy.’”

Wilds says thinking about it more broadly, societal messages play a major role in stigma and silence as well. “The lack of funeral rituals, minimal bereavement time, and political tension around pregnancy are just a few examples. These messages can lead you to feel unacknowledged and unseen in your loss, implying that it doesn’t ‘count’ as a real loss. You should simply ‘move on, try again, or just accept that everything happens for a reason.’”

Many women find dealing with these judgments, platitudes, and dismissive responses forces them to keep their pain to themselves making what should be a natural grieving process instead a complicated and lonely experience.

A unique journey

Although grief is a universal experience, each person’s journey is unique.

“In my work with loss parents, I often encourage them to be ‘active grievers,’” said Wilds. “Being active in your grief doesn’t mean forcing yourself to feel pain or constantly focusing on your grief, especially considering the lack of readily available social support.”

Instead, she recommends making space for it when you can, finding good listeners and sharing your story with those who understand.

“It means taking time to honor your loss and remember your baby. But doing all of this on your terms and at your own pace and knowing that the only way to the other side is through.” Therapy, journaling and joining a support group can be helpful tools. So, too, can using creative arts.

“Creative healing is about finding sacred spaces and forms of expression that meet you where you are at,” she said. “You might not be able to put your feelings into words, but maybe you can draw them. You might feel scared to speak with your partner about your sadness, but maybe you can pour your feelings onto the page.”

Her main goal in writing her recently released book, “Creative Healing for Pregnancy Loss,” was to offer pregnancy loss survivors a judgment-free zone to process their grief.

“It’s honestly the book I wish I had with me during the tougher parts of my grief journey, and I’m really honored to share it with other loss parents. I designed the prompts to target several healing components of grief: social support, emotional expression, meaning-making, memorialization, and figuring out how to move forward.”

It also includes prompts for feelings, prompts to clarify boundaries, tips for getting the right support, and even pages to create artistic tributes to your baby. “For example, one page invites you to fill a sketch of an empty jar with imagery that represents your grief,” said Wilds, “This symbolic grief container exercise helps put boundaries around your pain, bringing a sense of place and containment to an intangible loss.”

As for her own grief journey, she said she has come a long way.

“The losses will always be part of who I am, like scars I carry with me,” Wilds says. “When poked, they still hurt, but not as badly as they once did. I have learned to wrap an arm around my grief, instead of running away from it. Writing the book, sharing my story, working with other loss parents, and helping to break the silence brings ever-evolving meaning and purpose to my losses.”

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