

SELF

A Disturbing Amount Of Women Experience PTSD After A Miscarriage

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By Korin Miller

New research underscores what many women already know.

It's a sad and disturbing fact of life: Miscarriages happen, and they can be devastating for parents-to-be. Now, a new study has shown just how far that devastation can go—miscarriage caused post-traumatic stress disorder in nearly half of the women surveyed.

The findings come courtesy of researchers at the Imperial College London. For the study, which was published in *BMJ Open*, researchers surveyed 113 women who had recently suffered from a miscarriage or ectopic pregnancy (a pregnancy where the egg implants outside the uterus). The majority of women had experienced a pregnancy loss in the first three months of pregnancy.

Researchers discovered that four in 10 women reported experiencing symptoms of PTSD three months after their miscarriage, including moderate to severe anxiety, depression, and distress. Women also reported that they regularly re-experienced the feelings associated with losing their pregnancies and had “intrusive or unwanted thoughts.” Some women had nightmares or flashbacks, and others avoided anything that could remind them of their miscarriages. Nearly a third of women said their symptoms impacted their work life, while about 40 percent said it impacted their relationships with friends and family.

"I didn't have to look at a medical study to see this association—it's something I've seen ever since I've been practicing," Sherry Ross, M.D., an ob/gyn and women's health expert at California's Providence Saint John's Health Center, tells SELF. "The emotional effects of a miscarriage have been completely underestimated for women and their partners. It's something the medical community has to be more aware of and more sensitive to."

Miscarriage can be a debilitating experience, but it's unfortunately common. According to the American Pregnancy Association, up to 25 percent of all clinically recognized pregnancies end in miscarriage, the term used for a pregnancy that ends on its own within the first 20 weeks of gestation. That puts a good portion of women at risk for suffering the effects of a miscarriage, including PTSD.

According to the Mayo Clinic, PTSD is a mental health condition that's triggered by either experiencing or witnessing a terrifying event. Symptoms can include flashbacks, nightmares, severe anxiety, and uncontrollable thoughts about the event. An estimated 7 or 8 percent of the population will have PTSD at some point in their lives, and about 8 million people suffer from the condition each year, the National Center for PTSD says.

Gail Saltz, M.D., a psychiatrist and host of “The Power of Different” podcast, tells SELF that she’s not surprised women may suffer PTSD after having a miscarriage. “A wanted pregnancy stirs many fantasies of the child and the family-to-be, even at the earliest phase,” she says.” This fantasy is very real and very wished for, so loss of the pregnancy, even at three months, feels like the loss of the would-be child and the would-be family.” Clinical psychologist John Mayer, Ph.D., author of *Family Fit: Find Your Balance in Life*, agrees. “Miscarriage is an extreme trauma,” he tells SELF. “Breaking that trauma down even further, it is a physical, emotional, and social trauma.”

The circumstances surrounding the loss may contribute to a woman's risk of PTSD, such as whether this was a wanted pregnancy, whether it came at a bad time and the loss is manifested by guilt, or whether it came after a long period of trying to conceive, Michael Cackovic, M.D., an ob/gyn at The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center, tells SELF.

The situation in which the miscarriage happened may also contribute, he says. For example, a woman who suffered a sudden miscarriage may receive more of a shock than someone who had prolonged cramping and bleeding beforehand. "Unfortunately, I also believe that the way the news is given and the setting can also contribute: Was it done in a busy office setting? Did the provider have the time to sit and grieve with them?" Cackovic says.

For some women, miscarriage also creates a fear their reproductive system is damaged in some way and they won't be able to have a child, Saltz says. (Luckily, fewer than 5 percent of women will have two miscarriages in a row, according to data from the American Society for Reproductive Medicine.) Guilt and feelings that a woman is somehow responsible for the miscarriage may make it even more traumatic, Saltz says, as can the fact that a woman often feels alone because it can be hard to talk about miscarriage.

But talking about it can help lower the odds that a woman will suffer PTSD after a miscarriage and help her move past the trauma, Mayer says. If you experience a miscarriage, he recommends talking with your doctor to get the facts on your physical health and ability to conceive in the future. "It helps some women after miscarriage to look at pregnancy as a process and [believe] that you will get pregnant again in the future," Mayer says.

He also recommends reaching out to other women who have been through a miscarriage. Your doctor may be able to refer you to a miscarriage support group, or you can search for online message boards for women who have been through similar trauma.

Most importantly, don't be afraid to ask for help. "If in the first weeks there is anxiety, sadness, nightmares, and social withdrawal, those women need help via support of friends and family, therapy, and sometimes medication," Saltz says. "By treating it early, you lessen the likelihood of going on to develop PTSD."