

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

According to the March 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.

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

See MISCARRIAGE, A4

VIDEO ONLINE

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

MISCARRIAGE

Continued from A1



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

"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



are harder than others. The

some days

COTTRELL 31-year-old from Egg

For

Amanda

Cottrell.

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 Î 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 You-Tube and immediately received a flood of comments from women sharing their own sto-

A miscarriage is the

"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. I felt very vacant, like I was a shell of a person."

MICHELLE FREEMAN

Who grew up in Ventnor and suffered a miscarriage at 91/2 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 sto-

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 uncomfort-

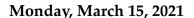
"People don't like to talk about death, at all," said Ann Coyle, manager of Perinatal Bereavement Programs at Virtua Health in Voorhees. "That's the problem in society. That is the one guarantee in life - that we're all going to die. No one wants to think about the death of a child or a baby because 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

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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.

'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

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**. Continued from A1

stigma around talking about it. It's uncomfortable. It's personal. It's traumatic. There are many reasons why it's often not openly talked about, but then, the women suffer alone.

The Ocean City woman asked to remain anonymous for this article. She doesn't want her friends and others in the community to know she suffered a loss. She doesn't want the "I'm so sorry" comment.

She also thought speaking publicly about it would embarrass her children, but she was overwhelmed with their supporting responses.

When she reached out to The Press for this article, she also emailed her children and opened up about her miscarriage for the first time in more than 50 years

"Writing this to you has caused me to cry about it after 53 years almost for the first time," she wrote in an email.

Her children responded to her with loving and supportive messages, telling her they're there to listen if she wants to talk more about the loss.

"I was so touched by their responses," she said through tears. "They were so sorry that had happened. They felt bad for me that I didn't have anyone to support me.

"It was sort of just ignored all of these vears, which is why now it finally made me cry,' she said. "I'm sure I cried about it a few times, but when I cried it was a lonely thing.

Another reason why she never spoke about the loss was because those around her had minimalized losing the baby.



EDWARD LEA / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Patricia Jaggie is a retired labor and delivery nurse and suffered a miscarriage in 1976. She sat with countless women who suffered miscarriages and conducted a support group for women who have experienced a maternal loss.

She remembered at her dilation and evacuation (D&E), a procedure performed in the second trimester of pregnancy to remove pregnancy tissue, the doctor discussed his dinner plans that night.

But it was her conversation with her motherin-law that stuck with her all these years.

'My mother-in-law said, 'Now don't tell anybody. You have to keep this a secret," she said.
"I just took it for her word. If I had a best friend, I didn't even tell that person. That made me feel like I had done something really wrong, like it was a disgrace.

"I remember thinking to myself, 'I feel sad about this, and I just lost a child. Yet I can't talk about it with anybody," she added. "I felt sorry for myself. I wish I had some sympathy, for someone to pat me on

the back and tell me that it's OK."

While she doesn't feel guilty anymore, at the time she thought she could have caused the miscarriage. She recalled the doctor saying it was probably for the best because there was "probably something wrong with it."

'There's always something vou can do'

Ronald Librizzi takes issue with that. Librizzi, 74, has more than 40 years experience in maternal fetal health and worked at Pennsylvania Hospital, now Penn Medicine, and Thomas Jefferson University Hospital in Philadelphia and Virtua Health System before retiring in the fall.

"When people say, 'It's very common to have a

THE NUMBERS ON MISCARRIAGES

pregnancies before 20 weeks end in miscarriage end in

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of women who have repeat miscarriages have an unknown cause

out of 100

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Source: March of Dimes

miscarriage, don't even worry about it. You're young. You're healthy. You'll be able to get pregnant again.' That's probably the most miserable thing you could say to somebody ... that it happened for the best or it was probably something that was abnor-mal," he said. "It didn't happen for the best. It never happens for the best.

"People will have multiple miscarriages, he said, and most providers will say, 'Well, you know, there's really nothing I can do.

That's where I take issue, there's always something you can do," he said. "You may not know whether it's going to work or not, but there's always something you can do. There's always something that caused it.'

The issue, he said, is the lack of research of what causes miscarriag-

Librizzi said 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, so people don't bring it up.

We don't want to talk about it. We don't want to dwell on it because that would be something that's not going to be good for you, where only the opposite is true," he said. "When people don't talk about it, it makes people feel like it's not important.'

Two years ago, Patricia Jaggie was in a local department store when a woman approached

'Oh my gosh ... Pat ... is that you? You probably don't remember me but ... you saved my life,' the woman said.

Having worked at Shore Medical Center in Somers Point as a labor and delivery nurse for 20 years, being recognized outside of work was not unusual for Jaggie

"But this encounter was a bit different. I saved her life?" Jaggie recalled asking.

The women had remembered being in the hospital after suffering a miscarriage. She

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

said friends, family and medical staff came in and out and talked and talked, trying to fill the space.

She remembered Jaggie coming in and simply sitting with her, holding her hand, just being in the moment.

'You were there," the woman told Jaggie. "I went home to my two other children like nothing had happened.'

Standing in the department store, Jaggie's next question jolted the woman. What was her son's name?

"No one ever asked me that before," the woman said, before saying his name and admitting to never telling her other children about the baby she had lost.

Jaggie suggested she discuss the miscarriage with her children. A few months later, in the same department store, Jaggie encountered the same mom again.

"Oh my gosh, Pat, you were right," the woman said. "I told them. Now we can talk about him. He is part of our family."

Jaggie then told the woman of her own experience and how her own miscarriage was a reality of her own life.

"My son had a name," Jaggie, 71, from Galloway Township, said. "My children and my grandchildren all know my son's name."

Working through the grief

In her backyard, under a tree, there is a stone that reads, "Tho Our Arms Never Held You .. Our Hearts Always Will." The other stones under the tree have the names of the five babies her daughters lost through miscarriage. There's also a stone for Adam, Jaggie's son that she lost in her first trimester on Christmas 1976.

'It's been a topic that's so uncomfortable to people," she said. "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."

Grief is expressed in many ways, said Joey Miller, a Chicago-based psychotherapist who specializes in reproductive psychology, trauma and loss.

Sometimes, she said, people misunderstand or minimize grief because it's different to their way of grieving.

And there are deeper levels of trauma that could develop, she said, such as shame and jeal-

"Seeing everybody else on the planet - their friend, their sister-in-law get pregnant, and seeing something they so desperately want get taken away from them, through no fault of their own, can bring on some really dark thoughts," Miller said.

And because those different emotional lavers aren't talked about, and because some women feel shame in opening up about those dark thoughts, they continue to suffer in silence.

Miscarriage is almost a double loss, Miller explained. A woman not only loses the hope for her baby's future, but she also doesn't have anything to hold on to from the past.

"There's no social norm (for perinatal loss)," she said. "There's no adage to say, 'They lived a long life,' where you can find comfort in your memories. They don't have 60 years of memories, they don't have all of these pictures. They may have one ultrasound picture.

The fact of the matter is, even though the physical baby has died, that relationship and identity don't," she added. "This baby, this life, is always going to be a part of this woman's obstetrics history and her life story, whether we actively and openly talk about it or we

Grief is treatable, she said, and opening up about grief is starting to chip away at the stigma surrounding mental health.

"These women are not wrong in their grief," she said. "Something wrong happened to them.

Álthough Jaggie lost Adam 45 years ago and speaks openly about him, there's still a void.

"I will always carry the loss," she said. "It's not accompanied by pain, as it was for so very long. The more that we can be open about it, the more helpful that is for families to have that meld into a happy life again."

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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**. **CJ FAIRFIELD** Staff Writer

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

ANN COYLE

Manager of Perinatal Bereavement Programs at Virtua Health

good and bad on both sides."

CONVERSATION

Continued from A1

loses that I had."

But she finds it therapeutic to talk about all the losses she's experi-

Patricia Jaggie and Amanda Cottrell feel the same. Jaggie, 71, of Galloway 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

"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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