

World Mental Health Day: Acknowledging Pregnancy Loss in the Legal Industry

By **Lori L. Pines**

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Tomorrow is World Mental Health Day, an important day to increase awareness of experiences that can trigger mental health challenges. One such experience is pregnancy loss, something that occurs frequently, but is rarely discussed in law firms and legal departments. October has, in fact been designated as Pregnancy and Infant Loss Awareness Month in the United States in order to honor those who have suffered such losses.

Pregnancy loss, which can strike women at key stages of their legal careers, takes an enormous mental and physical toll on those affected by it. By increasing awareness of the issue in the legal profession, we can better support our colleagues who face these devastating losses.

The incidence of pregnancy loss is staggering. Up to 25% of all known pregnancies result in pregnancy loss (losses are referred to as miscarriages prior to 20 weeks of gestation and stillbirths thereafter). And while many female lawyers consider postponing childbearing until their careers are more established, the rate of pregnancy loss increases with age, i.e., someone in their 30s or 40s is more likely to experience pregnancy loss than someone in their 20s.

Unfortunately, many women lawyers dealing with pregnancy loss feel pressured to suffer in silence when that closeted approach can make the impact of the loss on their health and well-being much

worse. That is why it is so important to bring the issue out of the shadows in the legal industry and acknowledge that pregnancy loss poses a serious challenge to mental health. Pregnancy loss has, in fact, been scientifically linked to a greater likelihood of a number of mental

health disorders including anxiety, depression, complicated grief, and post-traumatic stress.

Lawyers are generally high achieving folks who like to win. But pregnancy loss can make a woman feel like a failure because she has literally come up empty. To compound the situation, the loss hits her when she is undergoing rapid hormonal changes, still bleeding, and experiencing fluctuating emotions ranging from shock and disappointment to sorrow, guilt, relief, and/or shame.

And I speak from experience when I say that the impact of pregnancy loss is by no means confined to women; it is an issue that unequivocally affects whole families. After having several miscarriages of my own while practicing law, I spoke with a number of male attorneys (in addition to many women) who were grappling with pregnancy loss. The men were



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clearly dealing with their own grief and many reported feeling helpless. I knew from firsthand experience how much it helps to be able to talk about the loss and to receive support from work colleagues in addition to others. Being able to help those men and women through the difficult process, to listen and to provide them with some comfort and encouragement, was in fact, one of the main reasons I entered the wellness field.

Twenty plus years ago when I was dealing with miscarriage issues, there were few, if any, formal wellness programs at law firms or companies. But today, wellness programs, like the one I am now in charge of at my firm, can help people navigate the emotionally-charged ordeal of pregnancy loss and other mental health challenges by teaching resiliency practices and providing other wellness tools and strategies.

Resilience, the capacity to bounce back from adversity and setbacks and leave trauma behind, can play a pivotal role in helping a person cope with and recover from pregnancy loss. Indeed, resilience practices can help a person dealing with pregnancy loss manage the grief, maintain perspective, obtain needed support, find positive coping methods, exercise more self-compassion, and move forward.

Every pregnancy loss is different, and the journey to recovery is a highly individual process with no set timeline. Some may be experiencing losses early in their pregnancies; others may be in their second trimester or later. And some may be facing a loss after a long struggle with fertility, which can in itself be a difficult, emotional, and expensive process.

There are also those who endure more than one pregnancy loss in a row. We simply cannot know or predict how a particular loss will affect a person or their relationship with their partner, let alone their ability to focus on work. But we do know that a person experiencing pregnancy loss benefits greatly from the support of family, friends, and others who are sensitive to what they are going through.

For lawyers facing pregnancy loss, it is certainly helpful to be surrounded by understanding and accommodating work colleagues who genuinely care and are willing to listen. No one should be forced to share the circumstances of their loss in the workplace if they would rather keep their personal lives private, but if the person experiencing loss is willing to open up to a co-worker friend, here are some things a co-worker can do for that person:

- Listen non-judgmentally
- Encourage them to take the time they need to heal
- Help reduce their workload and pitch in if possible
- Point them to firm resources including employee assistance plans and any relevant firm portal information regarding health and well-being resources
 - Connect them with legal personnel, benefits, and/or HR professionals who can direct them to mental health resources, and in appropriate circumstances, make suggestions about ways to find additional aid and guidance such as through healthcare apps, support groups, and/or professional help in the form of therapy or counseling.

These actions can aid the person facing pregnancy loss by reinforcing the dynamic principles of resiliency.

Unfortunately, as borne out by the medical data and my own anecdotal evidence, many attorneys experience pregnancy loss while practicing law. More can be done to help them move through the difficult times surrounding their losses. My hope is that we let this special day be the day we all recognize and become more open to discussing pregnancy loss in the legal workplace, as well as the many other life situations our co-workers might be facing that can pose mental health challenges. As a community, we should aspire to ensure that no one feels pressured to suffer through pregnancy loss or any other mental health challenge in silence.

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