



Mourning after the nightmare

CCL members reflect on miscarriage

by Holly Rutchik

Jonathan and Kristin Smies expected their third pregnancy to be a smooth sail. Been there, done that.

But the Teaching Couple from Green Bay, Wis., was devastated by a miscarriage.

Kristin, a 29-year-old stay-at-home mother to two daughters, 4 and 2, learned they were expecting while the couple was geographically separated due to Jonathan's work and military obligations. Kristin and their girls were staying with family in Florida while Jonathan, an attorney, worked in Wisconsin. Unable to celebrate the pregnancy with Jonathan, 34, in person, Kristin baked cupcakes topped with baby candies for a dessert at her parents' home. Her family squealed with excitement upon learning the news.

"Unfortunately," Kristin said, "we were not able to relish the good news for long."

Kristin began spotting a week

after her big announcement and, although optimistic, immediately sought out an NFP doctor. Her HCG and progesterone levels were checked as she continued spotting throughout the week. When the contractions began they reminded her of the early labor she had experienced in childbirth.

It was a great shock when she passed the baby.

"What I passed did not resemble a baby but I knew that it was," she said. "I still grieve when I remember those moments because that was the closest I ever was to beholding my child."

Following the miscarriage, Kristin sobbed in her bed. Her mother came to her and together they prayed a Divine Mercy chaplet. The loss was difficult for Kristin to grieve without her husband at her side. She took solace in being able to pray with her mother and the knowledge that the life of her baby had been celebrated

in the week between her pregnancy announcement and her miscarriage.

30 weeks

Miscarriage blindsides parents, packing an overwhelming physical, emotional and spiritual test. The chance of miscarriage can be as high as 25 percent, according to the American Pregnancy Association. For healthy women, the chance of losing a pregnancy falls between 15 to 20 percent. CCL members open to life run a risk of experiencing this heartbreak.

For David and Rebecca Varga, CCL members from Cleveland, Ohio, miscarriage halted their first pregnancy, leaving them in a state of shock.

David, a chemical engineer, and Rebecca, a homemaker, both 26, have been married three years. They lost their child 30 weeks into the pregnancy.

At week 25, Rebecca began to feel awful and her hands started to swell. She believed pregnancy was a natural process that had been over-medicalized, and admittedly, she didn't make regular appointments as frequently as recommended. Rebecca chocked her illness up to advancing pregnancy until her 30-week appointment, when her midwife noticed her uterus hadn't grown since her last appointment and her blood pressure and protein levels were slightly elevated.

A doctor she'd never seen found a bladder infection but concluded there wasn't likely any additional problem. Rebecca scheduled a follow-up appointment. Though the technician had found a heartbeat, it sounded abnormal to the intuitive 20-something.

Rebecca drove back to work still feeling unnerved, as if something was the matter. She cleaned out her desk before going for an ultrasound, convinced she wouldn't be returning

to work. Hours later an ultrasound technician abruptly left the room in search of a doctor, and Rebecca knew there was a problem.

Her beloved baby no longer had a heartbeat.

“It’s still a nightmare almost three years later,” Rebecca said. “They called the hospital to let them know that I’d be coming. I called David, who didn’t answer and therefore was later treated to the most awful voicemail he’d ever received.”

David took Rebecca to the hospital, and by the time she was in her hospital gown, she was having contractions and bleeding. Rebecca’s parents arrived shortly later. She later learned they had acted on a grave concern, wanting to be there for her and David in case she didn’t live.

Rebecca was suffering from severe pre-eclampsia and is thankful to have survived.

Continuing NFP

Following a miscarriage, some women are advised by their doctors to avoid pregnancy for varying amounts of months, depending on the experience and healing process. Other couples discern the need to avoid pregnancy while they grieve.

The use of the Sympto-Thermal Method is both physically and spiritually helpful post miscarriage (see sidebar, page 30). Its use was an asset to the Smieses, who were advised to wait until Kristin had one regular cycle. Through her post-miscarriage charting, Kristin was able to identify a luteal phase deficiency, which provided insight into what may have led to their miscarriage. After six months she and Jonathan were able to achieve pregnancy. They are now expecting their fourth child.

Charting proved more difficult for the Vargas, who were advised to wait six months before trying to conceive. They began their marriage

After miscarriage: 3 spiritual questions for a priest

Healing after a miscarriage involves much more than waiting for bleeding to subside. Grieving couples often face theological and spiritual questions about the child they lost. Father Erik Pohlmeier, a member of the CCL Board of Directors and pastor of Our Lady of the Holy Souls in Little Rock, Ark., addresses common questions following a miscarriage:

What happens to a child who dies pre-birth?

What is always certain is the mercy of God. God desires every child He creates to be with him forever. In 2006 a Vatican advisory board discussed the question and stated that because of God’s endless mercy and the love poured out in Jesus Christ, it is clear that God desires every child be saved.

A baby who dies before baptism is prevented from the sacrament for unavoidable reasons, so we trust our loving God, who judges all things rightly. Faith in that mercy overcomes all fear.

If there are remains, should a family bury a miscarried child?

Yes, the normal funeral rites include prayers and readings for those who die before baptism and are well-suited to the loss of a child in miscarriage. Circumstances have to be considered, but if there are remains to be buried, then they should be treated with the utmost dignity, as with every loss of human life.

Many Catholic cemeteries have areas designated for such burial, and a simple ceremony can be of great comfort as well as provide a physical location to remember that part of your family. It is not required to have burial at a cemetery and most hospitals will have their own protocols to follow if the parents wish. A pastoral judgment should be made as to what is most comforting to the family in need. If burial is not possible, then there are additional rites that can be used. The official Book of Blessings has a blessing for a couple following miscarriage.

What can parents who have miscarried do to work on spiritual healing?

Pray for healing from the pain of loss.

God understands this as a Father whose

son died on the cross. Mary can also be a great source of comfort, especially with images like [Michelangelo’s] Pietà. She fully accepted God’s plan and yet felt the pain of loss. Her example can help us offer the pain in a redemptive way.

Also, it is important that a human life, even in the earliest moments, has become an eternal creation. Your child is already an eternal soul who we entrust to God’s care. God looks into the heart of a grieving couple and when the faith of their lives is clear, God receives the child entrusted to their care knowing he or she was deeply loved. That love and the intention to share faith with their child matters. For eternity, that soul is a part of God’s plan for you as a man and woman. Nothing can take that away.



open to children and had therefore never charted a complete, normal cycle. The stresses of their loss made it more difficult for her to “dust the cobwebs” off her chart. After two months they conceived and trusted God’s timing was best.

“I think NFP makes one more sensitive to the fact that life is a divine gift, which is set in motion by a husband and wife giving themselves to each other,” Jonathan said.

Even with a spiritual outlook, not being able to hold and hug that divine gift brings profound pain. There is no right way to mourn the loss of a child, and no two couples will grieve the same way. Nebraska author Karen Edmisten addresses the gnawing grief of miscarriage in her book *After Miscarriage: A*

Catholic Woman’s Companion to Healing and Hope, published in February by Servant Books.

“Healing takes longer than many people expect, think or hope it will,” said Edmisten, who has lost five children to miscarriage. “Sometimes the most helpful thing is having a spouse or friend who will listen to us when we want to talk about our children. We may need to talk for many weeks or months, or in some cases, even years.”

Every couple Edmisten interviewed for the book confirmed that they view miscarriage as a very real loss, the death of a child.

“Fathers do grieve this loss deeply, too,” she said. “They often just express their grief differently from women, or they sometimes feel they

shouldn’t express grief in order to remain strong for their wives.”

Although they trust their child is in heaven, the Smieses’ sorrow manifested itself in the grip of fear. “Having a miscarriage is a painful experience,” Kristin said. “Right afterwards, we felt fearful that more miscarriages would be in our future. But then we came to the profound realization that all life is a gift, regardless of how long it is lived.”

For Rebecca, grief came in the form of wondering if she were to blame. “The following couple of weeks were extremely difficult,” she said. “I was very weak and spent a lot of time staring, crying and praying, asking God why and condemning myself for not having gotten help sooner.”

After miscarriage: 5 physical signs to recognize

Many women have questions about their bodies, cycles and charts following a miscarriage. Because each loss is different, it is best to consult your doctor before resuming marital relations.

CCL consultant Vicki Braun shares five physical signs to look for when returning to charting after a miscarriage:

- 1 **Charting** The start of a miscarriage can be charted as day one of a new cycle, even though the bleeding is not related to menstruation.
- 2 **Basal body temperature** The body temperature may stay elevated for some time following a miscarriage due to the presence of HCG in the body and elevated levels of progesterone. These temperatures will begin to taper as the women’s body metabolizes these hormones.
- 3 **Mucus** A woman should begin mucus observations as soon as bleeding has subsided. Due to the stress of a loss and the remnants of progesterone in the bloodstream, mucus signs may take some time to reappear.
- 4 **Cervix** If a woman normally checks her cervix for signs of fertility, she should wait to ensure all bleeding has stopped before resuming daily checks. Doing so will assist in avoiding infection.
- 5 **First ovulation** It is difficult to predict when a woman will ovulate again following a miscarriage. Observing fertility signs and a changing, progressing pattern of mucus from less to more fertile will alert the couple to impending ovulation.

‘Blessed be’

The plodding journey through grief can bring about a deeper trust in God, the Smieses said.

“The fact we can trust God in practicing NFP also means we can trust His wisdom in the face of our loss,” said Jonathan. “He who giveth also taketh away. Realizing children are not things we acquire, unlike everything else in this consumer culture, but a gift somehow makes the loss of that same gift more tolerable.”

The Vargas turned to Job 1:21. When grief snatches them, they remind each other that their ultimate goal for having children was to populate heaven, which they have aided in doing with the life and death of their daughter. David then leads Rebecca in praying “The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh,” to which Rebecca responds, “Blessed be the name of the Lord.”

A solace to many families after a miscarriage is the act of recognizing or honoring the deceased baby: naming the child, determining a way to remember the child on special

occasions, and sometimes burying the child.

The Smieses named their daughter Athanasia, a name they later learned means “immortal” or “without death.” This brings peace to Rebecca, since her daughter will never undergo the same sufferings that living members of the family will.

A solace to many families after a miscarriage is the act of recognizing or honoring the deceased baby: naming the child, determining a way to remember the child on special occasions, and sometimes burying the child.

Rebecca wears a necklace with Athanasia’s birthstone and planted the lilies given to the family in honor of their daughter in their garden. She and David, who have since had two daughters, ages 7 months and 2, buried their daughter and have a headstone they can visit.

It wasn’t possible for the Smieses to bury their baby, so they had their child’s name inscribed on a brick in the Rosary garden at the Basilica of the National Shrine of Mary in Orlando, Fla. “Having a holy place to remember our child has helped with the healing process,” said Kristin.

Every story of a personal memorial touches Edmisten, who is raising three girls. “There is great beauty in the respect and dignity accorded to our lost children,” she said. “These stories of grief are ultimately enormously life-affirming.”

What was the best advice or thoughtful gift you received following a miscarriage?

Go online
artofnfp.org

When a friend or family member experiences a loss

- Treat the situation as a real death.
- Create a spiritual bouquet — a bouquet with prayer intentions.
- Call or email; let them know you are there.
- Send a sympathy card, or perhaps a card offering a Mass.
- Make a meal or send a gift card to a restaurant so they do not have to worry about cooking.
- Offer to make calls for them to let others know what has happened.
- If they have older children, offer to take the children out for the day or a few hours.
- Help arrange a funeral Mass and burial.
- Offer to listen, if they want to talk.
- Remember their loss and offer a Mass around All Souls Day.
- Organize a prayer chain of friends who will intercede for the family.
- Remember the anniversary of the baby’s death and when the baby was supposed to be born.
- Be patient. Grief takes time.



From: *The Infertility Companion for Catholics* by Angelique Ruhi-López and Carmen Santamaría

See how we can help bring God’s strength to

Marriage & Families

In Your Parish



Fr. Matthew Habiger, OSB



Deacon Rick & Jenny Condon



Fr. Daniel McCaffrey

Clergy Conferences...
presenting *Humanae Vitae*, *Familiaris Consortio* and *Evangelium Vitae*.

NFP Weekends...
we preach all homilies and provide seminars following the Masses

4-Day Parish Mission...
based on the four pillars of the Catechism of the Catholic Church

2-3 Day Seminars...
introducing Theology of the Body

Contact us at:
NFP Outreach | 888-637-6383 | www.nfpoutreach.org