

Perinatal Loss: considerations for treatment of prolonged grief

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THE *Perinatal* PSYCHOLOGY PRACTICE

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Introductions



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THE *Perinatal* PSYCHOLOGY PRACTICE



Our Aims

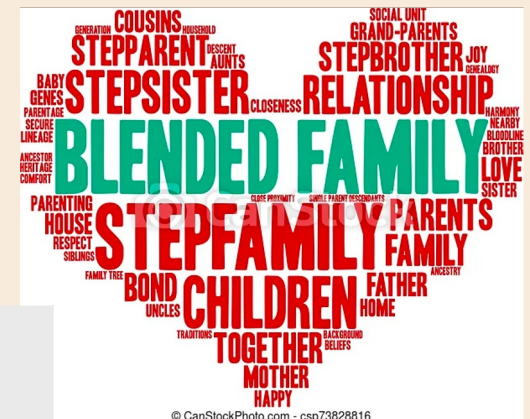
To define perinatal loss and describe how grief in this context may differ from other forms of bereavement

To describe common psychological impacts of perinatal loss

To describe clinical considerations for assessment and therapeutic support



HOUSEKEEPING



Darwin, Z., Domoney, J., Iles, J., Bristow, F., McLeish, J., & Sethna, V. (2021). Involving and supporting partners and other family members in specialist perinatal mental health services: Good practice guide. NHS England.



Definitions



Perinatal: "*peri*" = around, "*natalis*" = of or pertaining to birth

Prenatal/antenatal= during pregnancy, before birth

Postnatal= after birth

Intrapartum= period during labour and childbirth

You might also hear "partum" instead of "natal"- antepartum, postpartum

In relation to mental health, 'perinatal' usually refers to the period from conception up until the end of the first postnatal year

Sometimes extended to the end of the second postnatal year ('first 1001 days')

UK Context: NHS Perinatal Mental Health Services



NHS Talking
Therapies for
Anxiety and
Depression



Maternal
Mental
Health
Services



Community
Perinatal
Mental Health
Teams



Mother and baby
inpatient units



Parent-
infant
services



Neonatal
Intensive
Care
Services



The slide features a light beige background. In the top right corner, there is a stylized illustration of a plant with a light beige stem and a blue, star-shaped flower. In the bottom left corner, there are two stylized plants: one with a red, star-shaped flower and a yellow stem, and another with a green, star-shaped flower and a yellow stem. The text "What is perinatal loss?" is centered in the middle of the slide in a dark brown, sans-serif font.

What is perinatal loss?

Types of Perinatal Loss

Miscarriage

Ectopic Pregnancy

Termination for medical or non-medical reasons

Stillbirth

SUDI/ SIDS

Neonatal death

Loss of fertility

Separation from babies / children taken into care

Often
accompanied
by "non-death
losses"

Loss of identity

Other bereavement during the perinatal period

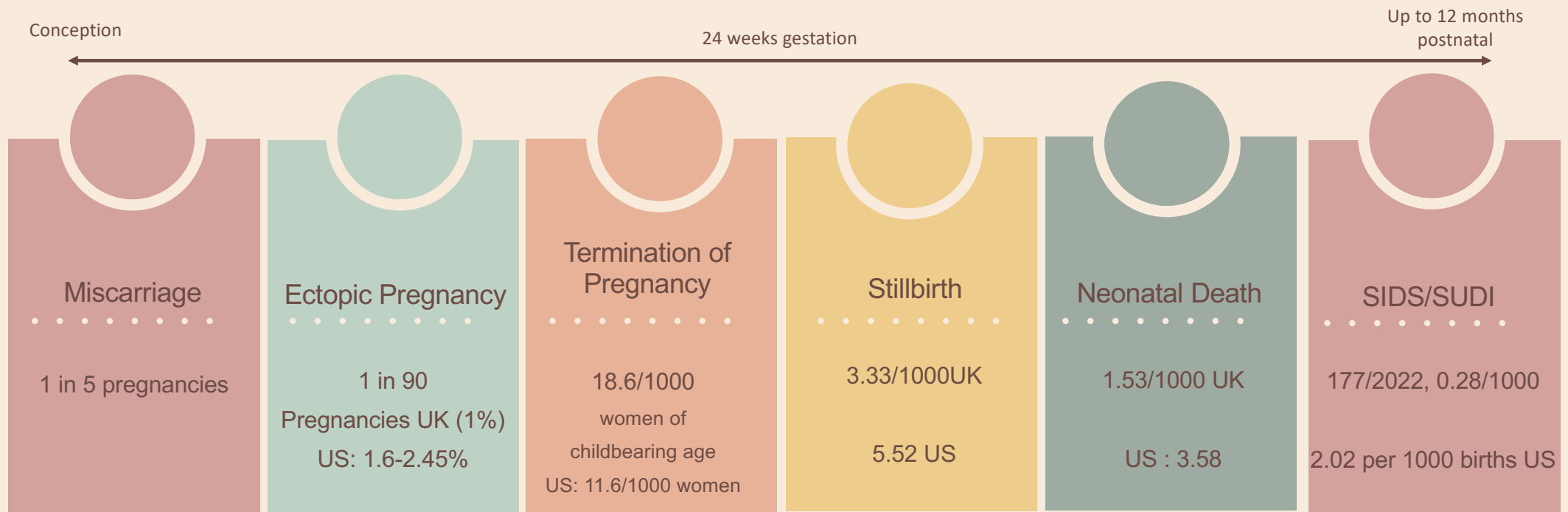
Loss of idealised/healthy child

Loss of imagined experience of pregnancy/ birth/feeding/postnatal period

Loss of friends, social group

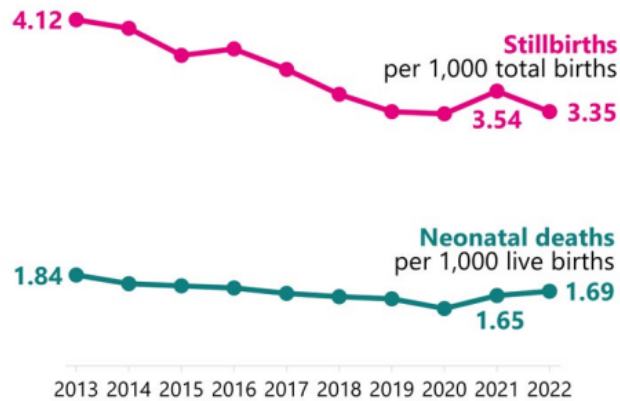
Loss of previous relationship to past physical body

Types of loss we will be covering today



1 in 4 pregnancies end in loss

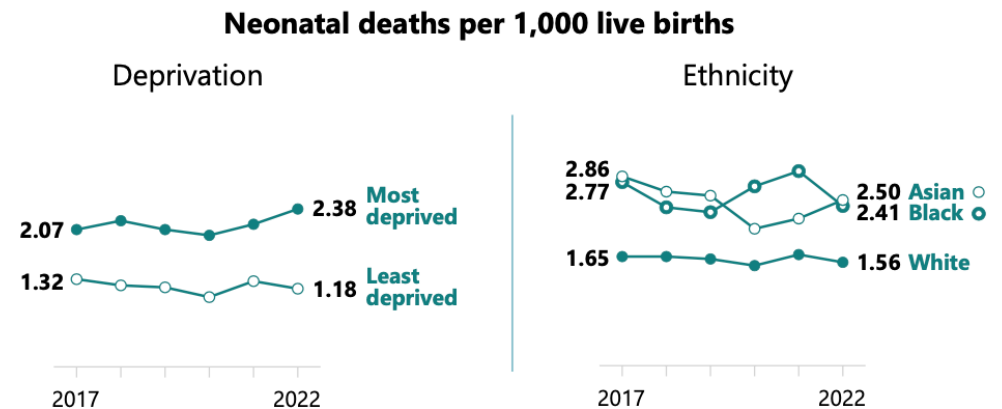
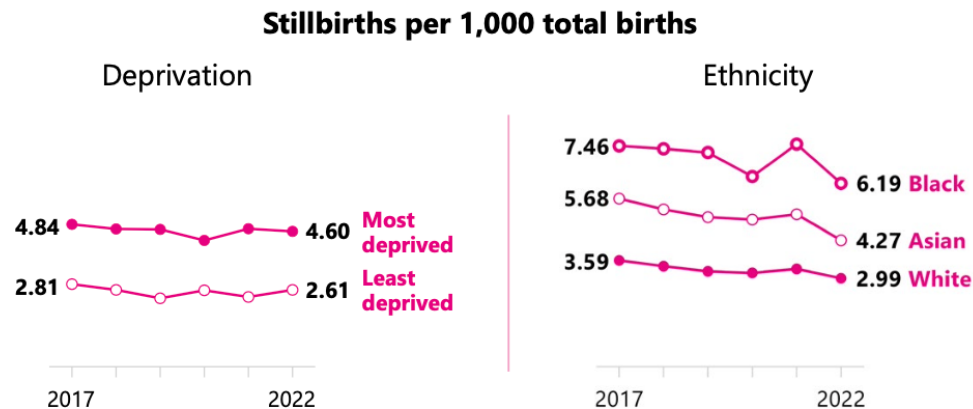
1. Stillbirth rates decreased across the UK in 2022, but neonatal mortality increased



Country	2021	2022
UK & Crown Dependencies	3.54	3.35
England	3.52	3.33
Scotland	3.27	3.31
Wales	3.88	3.63
Northern Ireland	4.09	3.49

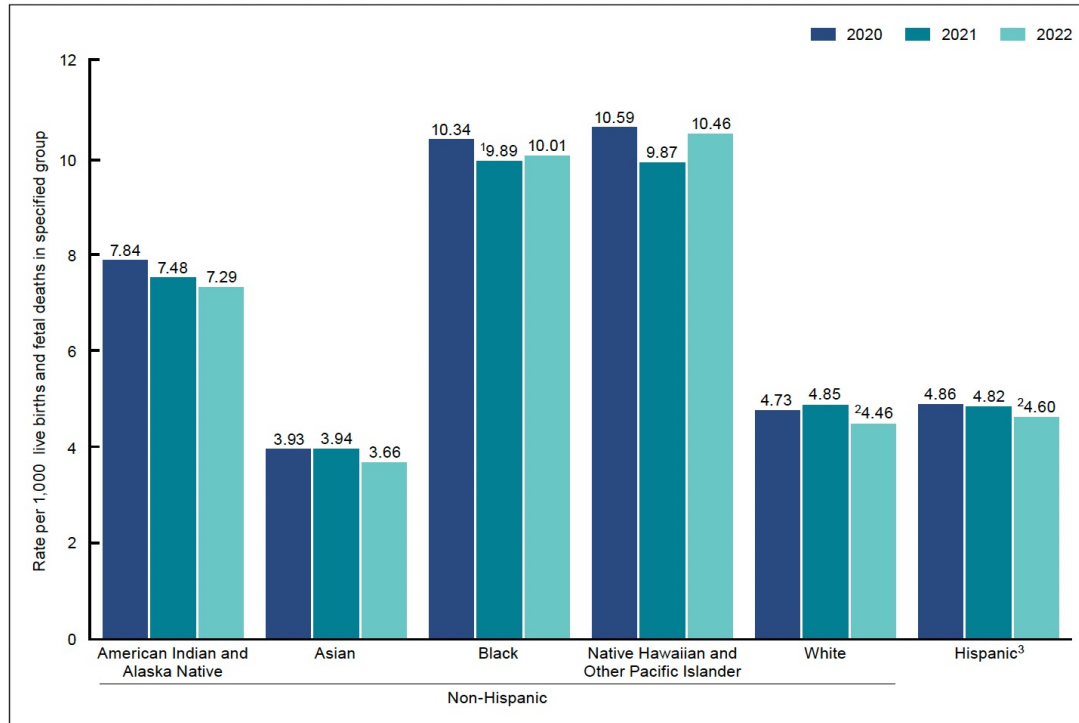
Country	2021	2022
UK & Crown Dependencies	1.65	1.69
England	1.60	1.67
Scotland	1.91	1.59
Wales	1.70	1.91
Northern Ireland	2.46	2.29

4. Despite recent improvements, inequalities in mortality rates by deprivation and ethnicity remain



Source: MBRRACE-UK Perinatal Mortality Surveillance Report for births in 2022

Figure 2. Fetal mortality rate, by race and Hispanic origin of mother: United States, final 2020 and 2021 and provisional 2022 data



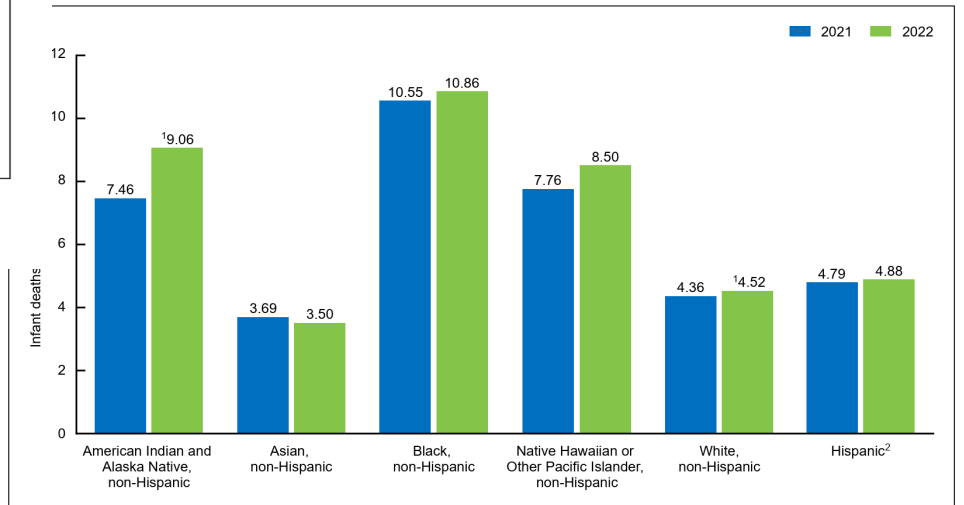
¹Significantly lower than 2020 ($p < 0.05$).

²Significantly lower than 2021 ($p < 0.05$).

³People of Hispanic origin may be of any race.

SOURCE: National Center for Health Statistics, National Vital Statistics System.

2. Infant mortality rate, by race and Hispanic origin: United States, 2021 final and 2022 provisional



¹Significantly different from 2021.

²People of Hispanic origin may be of any race.

SOURCE: National Center for Health Statistics, National Vital Statistics System, linked birth/infant death file.

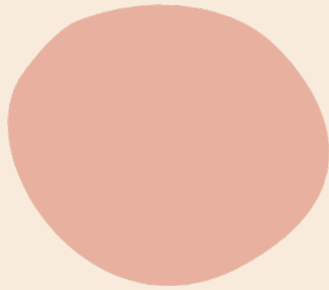
Video



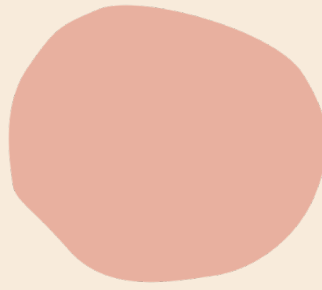
What is unique about grief following perinatal loss?



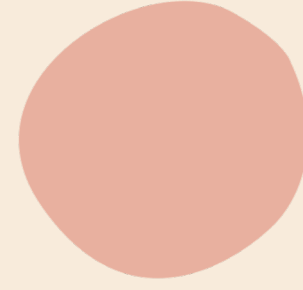
What is unique about perinatal loss?



Stage in
the life cycle



Connection to
physical body




Nature of
relationship






Stage in the life cycle

- Death where expecting joy and new life
 - Pressure to become pregnant again
 - Feeling left out, left behind, hurt, angry, failure
 - Shared loss with partner and family
- 




Connection with physical body

- The mother's body is part of the baby's creation, growth and protection
 - Unanswered questions/reasons and future uncertainty
 - Physical experiences and responses
 - Moral and ethical dilemmas
 - Blame, shame, failure, sense of personal responsibility
 - Physical reminders / triggers
- 



Nature of relationship

- Relationship is still forming
 - Memories may not be like memories of other relationships
 - Grief for imagined future, imagined child and identity
 - Lack of rituals and recognition by others
- 

Impact of perinatal loss



Impact on Individual



- Anxiety or depressed mood
- Rumination and/or pre-occupation with circumstances around the loss
- Emotional and behavioral avoidance
- PTSD or OCD symptoms
- Prolonged or Complicated grief response
- Difficulty trusting others, inc professionals
- Shattering or confirmation of beliefs about self, others, world, future
- Difficulty in allowing positive emotions or safely managing negative emotions
- Anger, loneliness, isolation, numbness, detachment
- Excessive self-blame, shame, guilt
- Hopelessness, suicidal ideation, self-harm
- Functional impairment (social, occupational, self-care, parenting)
- Future child-bearing decisions and experiences

Subsequent Pregnancies



- Anxiety
- Difficulties with uncertainty of pregnancy
- Difficulties managing risk (e.g. what I eat, what I do)
- Seeking a high degree of control, excessive checking and reassurance seeking
- Pre-existing PTSD or re-emergence of trauma symptoms
- Grief and wanting to remain close to baby that was lost, feelings of conflict around this
- Detachment from foetus/baby
- Not wanting to feel positive emotions
- Intrusive, obsessional thoughts
- Fear of Childbirth/Tokophobia
- Postnatally: baby's breathing, triggers around anniversaries, bonding

Interacting with others following loss



- Sharing the news, having to do this repeatedly
- Managing the reactions of others
 - Insensitive responses, lack of empathy
 - Their own grief
- Feelings of guilt about the impact on others, particularly family
- Change in relationship with friends
- Friends/families with babies of the same age or who are pregnant
- Colleagues
- Acquaintances – How many children do you have? Did you have your baby?
- Dealing with health care professionals, particularly around another pregnancy
- Talking to other children

Couple Relationship



Couple relationships have a higher rate of dissolving after miscarriage or stillbirth, compared with live birth.

Shared nature of loss- key source of support but also can be a trigger for distress.

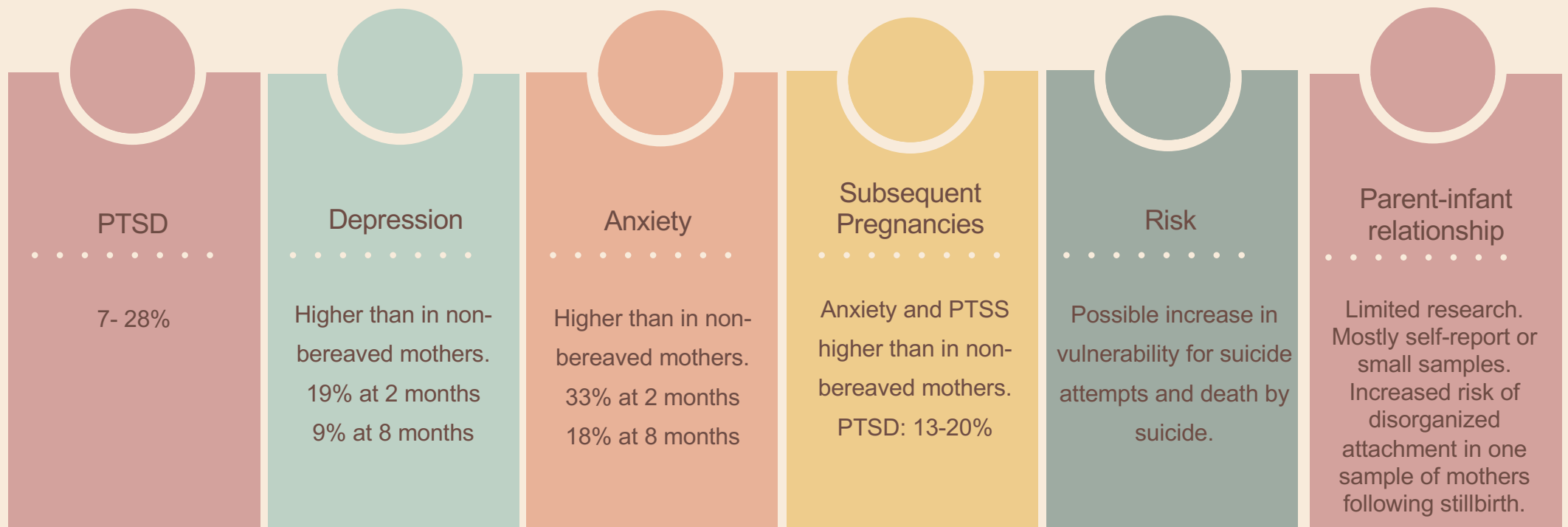
Different styles of grieving. Making space for one's own grief at the same time as supporting a partner/family member.

Impact of loss on all aspects of relationship, including sex and intimacy.

Either or both partner's previous experience of loss / trauma / "unresolved" issues.

Implications for future pregnancies that affect both partners. May have different childbearing goals.

Impact of Perinatal Loss on Mental Health



Need for higher-quality research in some areas




Prolonged Grief & Perinatal Loss

Limited Evidence



Only aware of one study (Kersting et al., 2007) that used clinical interview (following Complicated Grief Module, pre DSM-V) in women following termination for foetal anomaly – prevalence of 14% at 14 months post-loss


Self-Report Measures




Varying prevalence ranging from 12-50% in studies which have used self-report instruments (samples recruited from charitable organisations).

Guilt & self-blame following perinatal loss has been associated with more complicated grief symptoms.

Need for more research!



A recent systematic review of the literature about complicated grief following perinatal loss (Zhang et al., 2024) found only 10 studies! A mix of survey and qualitative studies. Only one (above) using diagnostic criteria.



PGD-13 over time

Mørk, S., Hvidtjørn, D., Möller, S., Henriksen, T. B., O'Connor, M., & Bonanno, G. A. (2023). *Grief trajectories after loss in pregnancy and during the neonatal period*. *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, 168, 293-299.

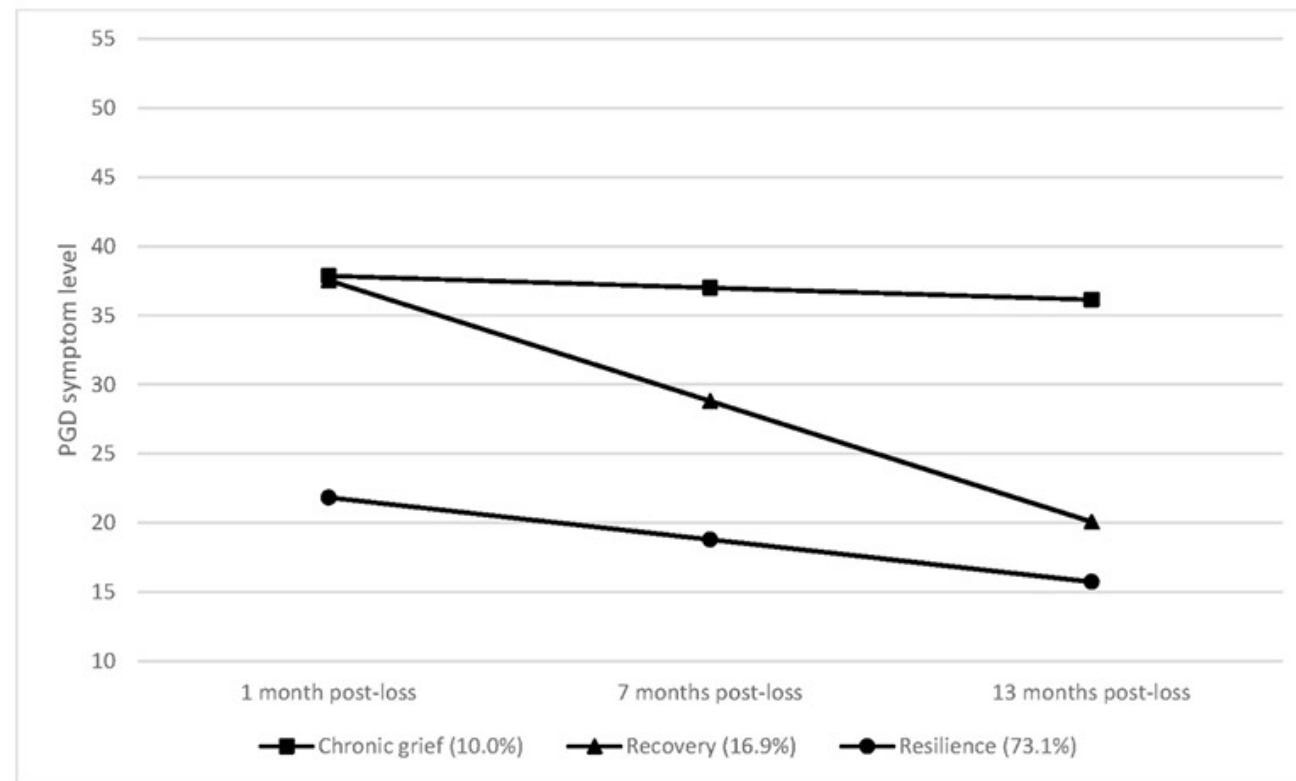


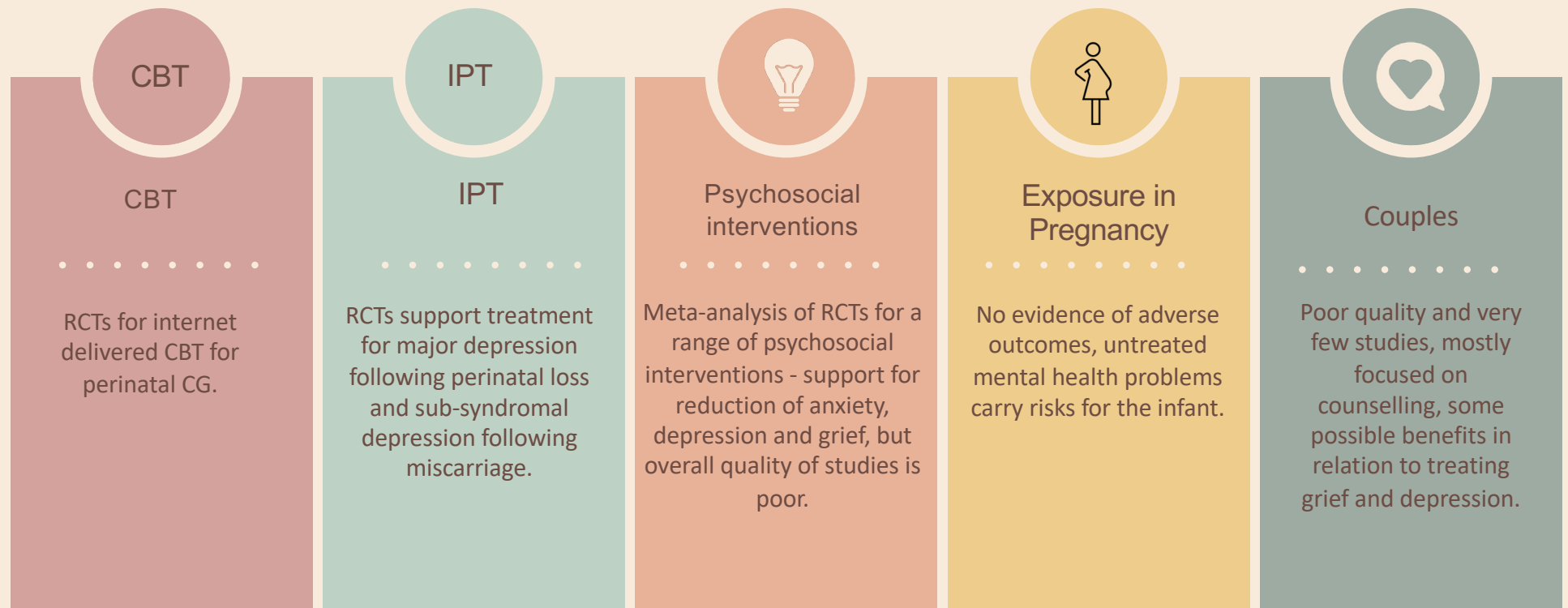
Fig. 2. Grief trajectories of 676 parents bereaved during pregnancy or in the neonatal period

Abbreviations: PGD *Prolonged Grief Disorder*

The slide features a light beige background with stylized plant illustrations in the corners. In the top right, there is a blue, multi-lobed plant-like shape. In the bottom left, there is a green plant with several long, thin leaves. To the left of the green plant is a yellow, angular, branch-like structure. In the far left, there is a red, spiky plant-like shape.

Considerations for treatment

Current State of Research



Helpful Questions During Assessment

How many pregnancies have you had?

How did you discover you were having a miscarriage/stillbirth?

Where did it happen? What treatment did you receive?

What was your physical experience of the loss?

Did you know the sex of the baby?
Did you name the baby?

Were you able to hold your baby? Take photos or any other memory making?

In your family or culture, are there any rituals or traditions when a person dies?

How was your physical recovery?

Was there a post-mortem investigation? Did you have the option of a ceremony or funeral?

Do you have flashbacks or intrusive memories of the loss?

How would you like me to refer to your loss when we are talking about it together?

Considerations for treatment planning

Consider Perinatal Context

Timing, what is most important now

Physical and emotional changes or tasks currently and upcoming

Culture, religion and spirituality

Who else is around?

Personal relationships, impact of loss on these

Other professionals

Holding in mind baby or other children

How might treatment support positive relationship with existing children or future children?

How do they want this event to be a part of their story and life moving forward?



Relationship with baby: pregnancy & postnatal

Anxiety and struggling to bond with baby is very common in pregnancy following loss

Not necessarily a sign of difficulties that will persist

Treating maternal mental health problems in pregnancy is one of the best things we can do for developing foetus and to help relationship post-natally

Review once baby is born, potential challenges may include:

- Hypervigilance/over-protection/anxiety/obsessive behaviours (e.g., checking) related to baby's well-being
- Conflict between relationship with baby who has died and baby who is alive
- Cut-off / disconnected

Impact of work on us as health professionals



Our own perinatal journey



Our own experience with loss and grief



Repeated stories of trauma and loss- vicarious trauma,
burnout

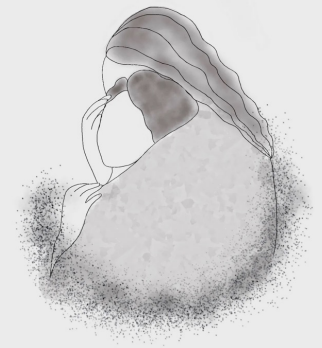


Moral injury- meeting need and offering care we want in
systems we are in

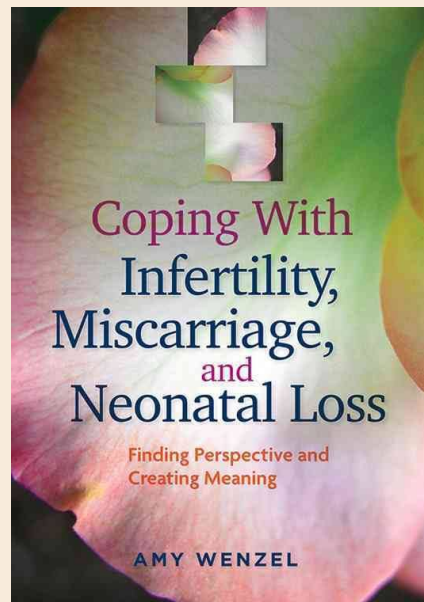
Love came first...

You don't move on after loss, but you must move *with*. You must shake hands with grief, welcome her in, for she lives with you now. Pull her a chair at the table and offer her comfort. She is not the monster you first thought her to be. She is *love*. And she will walk with you now, stay with you now, *peacefully*. If you let her. And on the days when your anger is high, remember why she came, remember who she represents. *Remember*. Grief came to you my friend because love came first. **Love came first.**

Words and art by Donna Ashworth

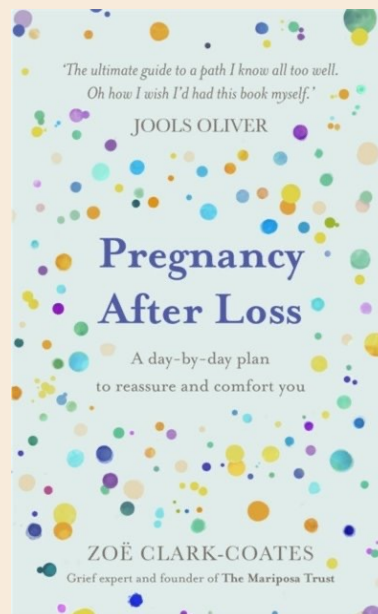


Relevant Books



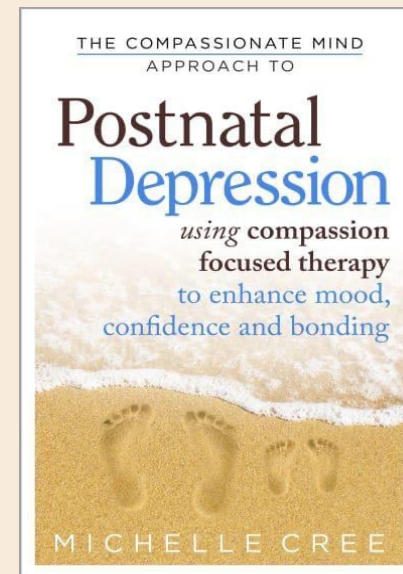
Coping with
Infertility,
Miscarriage and
Neonatal Loss

Amy Wenzel



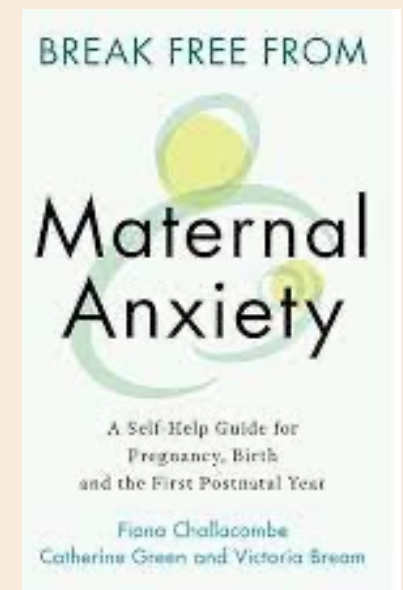
Pregnancy
after Loss

Zoe Clarke-Coates



Compassionate
Mind Approach to
Postnatal
Depression

Michelle Cree



Break Free
from Maternal
Anxiety

Fiona Challacombe,
Catherine Green,
Victoria Bream

Upcoming Course Free Resource Library

Jan
30
/26

Using Exposure Based Approaches in the
Perinatal Period
Prof Heather O'Mahen & Dr Sarah Healy



<https://pearlperinatal.com/training/>





Elearning course

Anxiety disorders in the perinatal period ➞

RCPSYCH Learning Hub





QUESTIONS?

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THANK YOU!