

# Organizational Support After Early Pregnancy Loss: The Importance of Training and Awareness Development

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## Abstract

### The Problem.

Miscarriage is an under-discussed topic in organizations. Many organizations in the United States do not offer organizational support for individuals who experience miscarriage. Not having organizational support may make an individual's experience of healing more challenging, impacting their professional and career development.

### The Solution.

Organizations can combat some of the challenges around pregnancy loss by implementing training & development and awareness development initiatives to educate around this topic and provide support for individuals who may be impacted.

### Stakeholders.

Stakeholders in this issue include HRD practitioners, managers and organizations that are committed to leveraging training & development initiatives to support employees and alleviating the organizational challenges surrounding the multiple journeys of working parenthood, including miscarriage.

## Keywords

miscarriage, early pregnancy loss, grief literacy, awareness development

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## Introduction

In recent years, there has been an emerging societal shift to embrace some degree of increased openness around parts of life that have previously been considered private. One space that has garnered more openness and honesty within public discourse and interest from an academic perspective (Lundgren & Wahlberg, 1999; Neucom & Prandl, 2022) is the lived experience of pregnancy and parenthood. Within public discourse, social media has been part of an effort to normalize and de-stigmatize a variety of experiences around parenthood (Andalibi, 2020; Dybis, 2019; Haller, 2017). This type of sharing on social media alongside a broader concern with issues surrounding gender equity inside the workplace (Hodgson, 2002; Milliken et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2011) can perhaps be seen as two catalysts for this shift towards increased dialogue surrounding the realities of working parents and specifically working mothers. Within academia, scholars have even leveraged research methods like participatory action research and autoethnography in their academic writing to bring personal knowledge and experience relating to pregnancy, motherhood, and even miscarriage into academic spaces (Gatenby & Humphries, 1999; Griffiths, 2021; Porschitz & Siler, 2017). With conversations around pregnancy and parenthood becoming more public in the media, dialogue surrounding the related experience of miscarriage has also heightened. Much of this dialogue encourages de-stigmatization and openness (Georgetown University School of Nursing, 2020; Hobson, 2015; Meda, 2020).

Critical HRD (Human Resource Development) scholars have raised awareness around identity-based marginalization in the workplace so that strategies can be developed to address and support employees (Collins et al., 2021; O Grada et al., 2015; Procknow et al., 2017). Pregnancy loss is an issue experienced by women and birthing individuals: two groups who are historically oppressed in the workplace (Keep et al., 2021; Rose & Oxlad, 2023). Given HRD's efforts towards fulfilling a commitment to human development through work (Kuchinke, 2011), researchers and practitioners within our field can explore the experience of early pregnancy loss as a potential new space within an employee's private life that may present itself at work and require support. Implementing educational and training & development initiatives may help individuals who experience pregnancy loss in their return to the workplace, support them as they navigate grief, and reconnect with their work and professional development.

The purpose of this perspective article is to explore the role of human resource development (HRD) as it relates to miscarriage within the workplace. With this article, we aim to offer possible strategies that encourage organizational action and support for affected employees around this topic. We argue that leveraging HRD's existing interest and expertise in awareness development and training & development initiatives could help to cultivate compassionate leaders and supportive organizations; prerequisites that are essential in order to support affected individuals in their return to work and, ultimately, their healing process after miscarriage.

## Miscarriage: Definitional Clarity

The definition of a miscarriage, also known as an early pregnancy loss or a spontaneous abortion (Alves et al., 2023), varies. Some sources define it as the sudden loss of a pregnancy before 20 weeks (Mayo Clinic, c. 2023), while others state it is a loss before 13 weeks, or within the first trimester (Stanford Medicine Children's Health, c2023). Eighty percent of all miscarriages occur early on, within the first 12 weeks of pregnancy (March of Dimes, 2023). After 20 weeks, a pregnancy loss is known as a stillbirth (Stanford Medicine Children's Health, c2023). The experience of miscarriage is common. It is estimated that approximately 26% of pregnancies end in miscarriage (Dugas & Slane, 2022).

Women and birthing people may experience significant physical, emotional, and psychological stress in the aftermath of a miscarriage (DeMontigny et al., 2017; Toffol et al., 2013). It is important to note that all experiences of pregnancy loss are different and vary depending on an individual's identities and personal circumstances. However, some individuals who go through a pregnancy loss may feel profound grief (Mergl et al., 2022), may develop severe anxiety and depression, and, in some cases, be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (Farren et al., 2020). One study that explored these psychological effects after miscarriage found that while this suffering reduces over time, it continues to have significant clinical implications for up to nine months following the loss itself (Farren et al., 2020). These long-term impacts can include feelings of guilt and prolonged distress (Maitlis & Petriglieri, 2019). Individuals may also feel the "psychosocial effects related to stigma" (Fairchild & Arrington, 2023, p. 252) and experience what Zucker (2021) refers to as the tri-fecta of silence, stigma, and shame created by a variety of social and cultural factors related to this loss.

Pregnancy loss presents a specific grief experience. There are many different iterations and types of grief, and miscarriage is unique given its liminality, between the "physical absence yet psychological presence" (McGee et al., 2018, p. 518) of a child for some women. Scholars have noted this unclear yet nevertheless traumatic experience as an ambiguous loss given the uncertain grief path and how to mark this grief without the typical rituals (McGee et al., 2018).

## Miscarriage in the Context of the Workplace

Porschitz and Siler (2017) state that, "at a fundamental level, miscarriage is a workplace event because it affects a large number of women" (p. 566). The workplace has been brought into many conversations about individuals' experiences of pregnancy loss in the media specifically regarding paid time off and leave policies within the context of human resource management (HRM). Many organizations have not explicitly provided individuals with time off after a pregnancy loss (Bologna, 2022; Donlan, 2023), and the workplace has not historically been hospitable to pregnant individuals (Gatrell et al., 2017; Gatto, 2020; Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2019). There is recent movement at the

legislative level in the United States to provide time off for individuals who experience pregnancy loss (Goldman, 2023; Wickramatilake, 2021; Wilson, 2023). However, recent media coverage shows that action around this topic at the macro level has resulted from the efforts of individual women who have experienced miscarriage themselves and advocated for organizational policy change (Lobell, 2022; Mabus, 2021; Valencia, 2023).

There is a variety of academic literature that explores miscarriage and work (Hazen, 2003; Porschitz & Siler, 2017). Miscarriage is categorized in research and written about by those who have experienced it as a trauma (Venkatesan & Murali, 2021). Martin (1990) points out that pregnancy generally has exemplified a variety of taboos related to female sexuality within both organizations and organizational theory. And Foucault (1978) states that “modern puritanism” has “imposed its triple edict of taboo, non-existence, and silence” (p. 5) related to sexuality broadly. However, miscarriage compounds some of these taboos related to sexuality, as individuals who experience miscarriage carry the burden of antiquated beliefs related to pregnancy and female sexuality, plus the shame and stigma surrounding the loss of the pregnancy itself.

Pregnancy loss may negatively impact an employee’s ability to navigate their professional experience effectively and thrive in the workplace (Keep et al., 2021). Grieving employees may experience “lack of sleep and fatigue, brain fog, concentration difficulties, crying spells, anxiety, social isolation” (Schoonover et al., 2023, pp. 11–12). The ability to move through this grief and return to work as normal can be difficult, given the particular grief experienced and the *taboo* nature of the event itself (Meunier et al., 2021). Additionally, as an undiscussed topic in the workplace and society at large, leaders and co-workers are often unaware of the situation and unprepared to deal with it, which can make the experience of returning to work even more painful (Maitlis & Petriglieri, 2019). However, for some women who experienced miscarriage, returning to work was reported as a distraction from the trauma (Keep et al., 2021) and as a possibility to feel “a sense of normalcy” (Schoonover et al., 2023, p. 4); thus, returning to a supportive work environment may contribute to the healing process.

Scholars exploring the experiences of employees returning to work after a miscarriage emphasize the dilemma these individuals encounter related to disclosure about their situation, this type of grief, and asking for support, as sharing pregnancy loss can also expose them to judgment, shame, and impact their careers (Keep et al., 2021; Rose & Oxlad, 2023). More broadly, sharing about miscarriage for individuals actively trying to have a baby implies disclosing pregnancy plans, which has historically reflected in discrimination and career withdrawal for women and birthing individuals (Gloor et al., 2018). There is extensive research showing how women’s careers are negatively impacted by the prospect of becoming pregnant, including wage gaps, incivility, and career derailment (Addati et al., 2022; Correll et al., 2007; Gatto, 2020; Gloor et al., 2018; Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2019). Some individuals who experience miscarriage decide not to disclose their situation and cope with the suffering without any support (Maitlis & Petriglieri, 2019). Given the difficult nature of early pregnancy loss, its societal silencing and its potential impact on professional development, a

miscarriage can also be viewed broadly as an example of an organizational undiscussable, defined as an experience in which “the undiscussable nature...impedes making sense of the situation” (Kormanik, 2008, p. 62). Kormanik states that these organizational undiscussables can “add to role conflict and ambiguity, and lead to inconsistent practices that foster concerns about equity, diversity, and fair treatment” (Kormanik, 2008, p. 62).

HRD practitioners have an opportunity to alleviate some of the organizational barriers of this experience that individuals may encounter through specific training and development initiatives aimed towards educating around this topic and providing leaders with the tools to support their employees when necessary.

## **The Role of HRD in Supporting Individuals Experiencing Miscarriage: Implications for Practice**

Birthing individuals will continue to experience pregnancy loss and will need to navigate this grief amidst the backdrop of their professional and organizational landscapes. While this is a highly personal experience, it is important that organizations provide support and education around this topic as this can be a difficult situation for birthing individuals to navigate given its potential impact on their professional lives. There is an opportunity for HRD practitioners to both support individual employees and foster supportive workplaces. Below, we broadly outline actionable educational and training & development interventions that organizations can utilize to (1) raise awareness around pregnancy loss and its impact within the workplace and (2) prepare leaders to encounter grief and trauma experienced by their employees. It is important to note that while these trainings would be helpful in educating an organization’s employee population broadly around this topic, it should not take the place of proper counseling for individuals who have experienced pregnancy loss if it is needed. HRD practitioners and managers should not take on a counseling role unless they have been formally trained to do so, but organizations can provide support for employees seeking this type of care through Employee Assistance Programs and confidential counseling resources (Collins, 2011; McGuinness, 2009; Obst et al., 2022).

Access to other employee-supportive organizational practices not directly related to miscarriage and pregnancy loss but equally important, including flexible working arrangements, counseling support, and medical or bereavement leaves, can also be facilitated if HRD professionals, leaders, and co-workers are prepared to respond to disclosure and support women and birthing individuals undergoing these traumatic experiences (Keep et al., 2021; Schoonover et al., 2023). Further, when attention is given to this topic in the workplace through awareness and training initiatives, it can nurture the development of a supportive organizational environment conducive to discussing more institutionalized forms of bereavement leave and other types of support. The workplace is an important part of social life and should provide the necessary organizational support that both acknowledges these events and eases the stressors that the workplace may introduce during this experience.

## *Educating Organizations About Pregnancy Loss and its Impact Within the Workplace Through Awareness Development Initiatives*

Miscarriage has been labeled as a topic that is often silenced (Gatenby & Humphries, 1999, p. 289) and is frequently kept private or hidden. Layne (2001) poignantly states that “in our culture, we deal with events like unsuccessful pregnancies, which challenge our cherished narratives of linear progress and the cultural mandate to be always happy, primarily by pretending that they don’t happen” (p. 25). The silence surrounding pregnancy loss, along with the sense of discomfort that talking about the topic causes in others external to the experience, may lead individuals who experience miscarriage to feel lonely and isolated (Bellhouse et al., 2018; Maitlis & Petriglieri, 2019). Research states that the societal tradition of disclosing pregnancy just after the first trimester amplifies the invisibility of episodes of miscarriage and results in inadequate or nonexistent support (Bellhouse et al., 2018; Keep et al., 2021). As mentioned above, individuals who experience miscarriage face a variety of challenges within the professional and organizational landscape.

For HRD practitioners, instituting awareness development initiatives can help guide planning around interventions that support a variety of transitional life issues (Kormanik, 2011). Kormanik (2011) argues that awareness development is defined as “a construct for describing the changes occurring in an individual as he or she goes through life transitions,” catalyzed by what can be seen as “transitional issues” (p. 116). Transitional issues (e.g., marriage, job lay-off, childbirth, death of a relative) often necessitate some level of awareness raising within the workplace (Kormanik, 2011). In this case, both individual and organizational awareness development can be leveraged to raise awareness around early pregnancy loss. Pregnancy loss can be seen as an unanticipated negative transitional issue that individual employees may struggle with. Awareness development training around miscarriage and pregnancy loss can not only help to support individuals who may experience this, but also proactively educate their managers, teams, and co-workers around this issue and how it may affect employees.

Although as of this writing, the authors could not find any studies evaluating the impact of educating employees about the topic of miscarriage and pregnancy loss, other studies have reported positive impacts of awareness development related to other sensitive and taboo topics, such as intimate partner violence (Adhia et al., 2019) and grief (Dewhurst et al., 2023). Adhia et al. (2019) analyzed interventions implemented in the workplace to support employees who experienced intimate partner violence and found examples of educational initiatives (e.g., computer-based training, fact sheets, experience sharing sessions, workshops with experts) focused on developing awareness about incidences of intimate partner violence, its impacts, how to respond to disclosure, and available resources to offer to those who seek support. Positive impacts included increased knowledge about the topic and willingness to provide support. Similar educational initiatives could be leveraged in order to raise awareness around the topic of early pregnancy loss for teams, managers and leaders.

## *Preparing Leaders to Encounter Grief and Trauma Experienced by Their Employees Through Grief-Literacy Training*

Rocco and Shuck (2020) raised the question, "...who considers the grief of...colleagues?" (p. 2) and introduced the importance of compassion and its place within organizations in situations related to grief and death. The authors stated that compassion involves noticing those who are suffering, practicing empathy, and taking concrete action (Rocco & Shuck, 2020). The action piece can, at times, be the most difficult to discern and navigate effectively as it can cause awkwardness or doubts; however, when paired with compassion, it holds powerful potential (Rocco & Shuck, 2020). While there is no universal approach to dealing with the experience of early pregnancy loss, creating space at work to discuss these issues with trusted, supportive HRD practitioners or managers is beneficial to employees who need support after a miscarriage, as "the workplace is no exception to the reach of compassion" (Shuck et al., 2019, p. 538). Scholars have noted that social networks play an important role in supporting women after a miscarriage, and positive support experiences from social groups and networks can alleviate the experiences of grief and psychological distress after an early pregnancy loss (Bellhouse et al., 2018).

Although it can be difficult, there is the potential for HRD practitioners, managers, and co-workers to acknowledge death, embrace grief, and support healing (Hazen, 2003; Vivona & Ty, 2011). Through training and development initiatives, managers and HRD leaders can be provided with frameworks and tools to create a grief-literate environment, which includes attentiveness to and acknowledgment of sorrow, and the ability to listen and talk about these difficult topics in a sensitive and caring manner for those who choose to do so (Dewhurst et al., 2023; Meunier et al., 2021). Training can also equip these leaders with concrete strategies to offer to their employees who are experiencing grief due to miscarriage, including asking if they need help communicating the situation to others in the team or if they would like to reduce the workload in the initial days, offering flexibility with their working schedule, renegotiating performance goals, and facilitating access to available supportive resources (Maitlis & Petriglieri, 2019; Schoonover et al., 2023).

When facilitated effectively and with a transformative learning approach, training & development initiatives can promote reflection and critical thinking, eliciting cognitive, psychosocial, and behavioral effects that may help understand individuals' experiences and reactions more deeply (Johnson, 2008). HRD practitioners may be able to include miscarriage, its subsequent grief, and its potential impact on performance or how an individual shows up to work in training sessions for managers, workshops, or discussion groups as an actionable extension of awareness development in the workplace. Training & development around this topic would serve to help combat the societal invisibilization of a topic that can be difficult to discuss and is associated with stigma and shame as it has been argued "women need greater support and acknowledgment of the grief and loss associated with miscarriage" (Bilardi et al., 2017, p. 279).

## Conclusion

Raising awareness around miscarriage and preparing HRD and leaders to support affected employees through specific training & development and educational interventions is essential in order to ensure that these employees have the necessary organizational support to heal and continue their professional development (Keep et al., 2021). While it is important to remember that not all individuals may feel comfortable sharing this highly personal experience at work, organizations themselves should be able to provide resources that can educate their HRD leaders and managers on this experience. Grief and difficult topics will continue to come up in both the lives of employees and the workplace setting, accompanied by a broader societal impetus to share, confront, and discuss difficult things openly. The ability for individuals to leverage organizational support and safely engage with compassionate managers and HRD leaders may serve to uphold the sentiment that organizations are, in fact, capable of people bringing their ‘whole selves’ into the workplace (Brown, 2018), even during hard phases of life. There is an opportunity for HRD to further explore new ways of leveraging our field’s expertise in training and development in order to organize and relate around difficult topics. This may serve to generate a culture of acceptance and promote more hospitable and supportive workplaces.

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