



The Other Side: How To Care For Someone
Who Has Experienced Pregnancy and Infant Loss

If someone in your life has experienced a pregnancy or infant loss, you have already seen just how utterly devastating that pain can be. As you navigate how to best care for this person, your intention and pursuit is very much needed. Because the thing about caring for someone is that you do not need to be an expert. Being aware of how to offer support is an essential skill set—and depending on your relationship to that person, there are many different ways to provide radical care and helpful support to someone. Healing from a loss this deep can be messy for everyone (as is life), so be ready to make mistakes, apologize and repair, where needed.

While you nor Poppy Seed Health can save a person from the pain and grief of a loss, we can hold them through the ebbs and flows of it. ‘The Other Side: How To Care For Someone Who Has Experienced Pregnancy and Infant Loss’ is a guide created by trained advocates in loss care and by members of the Poppy Seed Health team who have experienced miscarriage and infant loss. It is designed to provide practical tools and language that can aid those who are in a person’s care circle. Loss has been invisibilized by stigma and silence, so this guide offers ways to reach out, hold space for grief, strengthen support systems and to minimize harm. We focus on an idea called ‘care literacy’, a term contributed by birth worker Emily Varnam, which means developing a fluency in providing and receiving care. When more people know how to show up, more people will.

THE VARIOUS DEGREES OF CARE THAT A LOSS SURVIVOR NEEDS

“Ring Theory” was created to help articulate and visualize what a support network looks like around a person in crisis. The idea is that a person in crisis sits at the center of concentric rings and the rings represent the people in this person’s life.

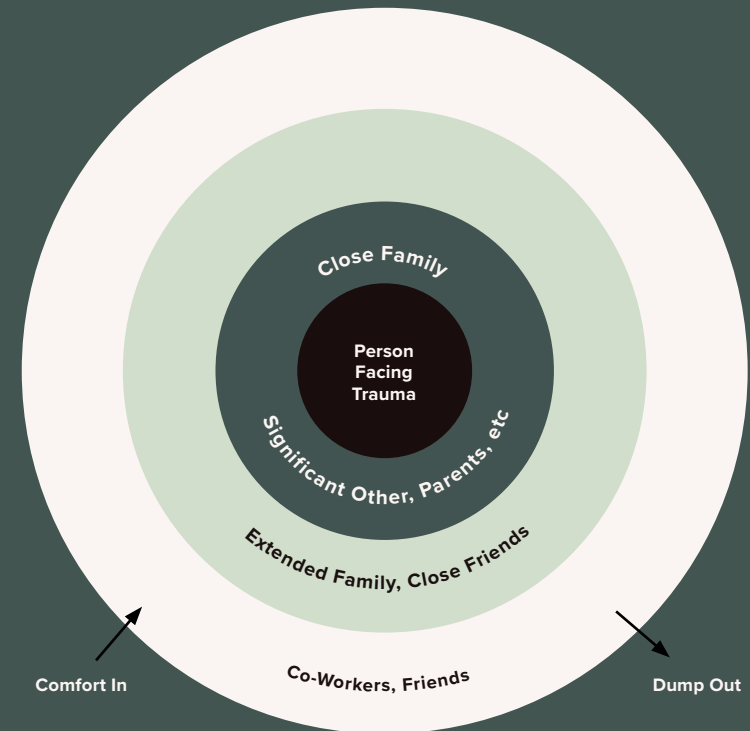
The closest and smallest rings are those closest to them: their partner or spouse, parents, best friends, etc. As the rings get bigger, they represent less ‘close’ relationships: friends, colleagues and people who are less directly affected by this particular event.

The rules are very simple.

1. Locate yourself on the map.
2. Offer support or comfort towards the rings closer to the center including the center. Do not vent.
3. If you need to vent or talk about your own experience, do so by going outwards towards the larger rings. This prevents those most directly impacted from being put in a caretaker role.

Not knowing what to say or who to share with often prevents people from showing up during times of grief and loss. It is okay if you don’t know what to say, showing up matters and using Ring Theory can prevent us from causing harm or unnecessary stress.

Ring Theory



Psychologist Susan Silk has created a helpful concept that makes figuring out what to say and what not to say a bit easier.

HOW TO REACH OUT

There is a balance between respecting someone's space and abandoning them. The truth is there is nothing you can say that will make it better, but saying nothing can make it worse. Reach out through text, a phone call, voicemail, or mail.

Acknowledge the loss.

Make an explicit offer of support vs. asking them to tell you what they need and remind them that they matter to you.

“Hi, thanks for sharing about your miscarriage, I'm so sorry you are going through that. I can drop off a lasagna and some salads on Wednesday at 5, I'll leave it on the porch. If you have laundry, you can leave that out and I can bring it back. Does that work? I care about you and I'm here if you need. You do not need to respond, but I'll keep offering things and you can reply if something sounds good. Feel free to give (partner's name) my number too. Take all the time you need. Love you.”

Tell them you are thinking of them.

“Hi, I heard this song today and thought of you, remember when this came on at _____ so fun!”

“LOL this meme is SO us, so glad you're my friend.”

Offer to just be with them.

“Hey, I'm going grocery shopping. I could pick you up and we'll do both of ours if you want?”

“Hey, I know you are packing up the baby stuff today, can I bring over some snacks and we'll do it together?”

Focus on empathy vs sympathy.

[This video](#) by Brene Brown explains it perfectly.

HOW TO OFFER SUPPORT

Learning how to support grief is going to serve you in living life—it is community building, it is part of loving people and it is part of being human.

Identify ways you can meet basic needs.

Offering support can sometimes feel overwhelming because stigma around loss has made it seem mysterious and uncomfortable. But, most people can support someone through this without formal loss training. A great starting point is to think of a person's basic needs day-to-day:

Daily maintenance of the home and family (e.g. laundry, dishes, walking pets, grocery shopping, etc)

- Food
- Shower
- Rest
- Enjoyment

Take a few minutes to think about what this person may have on his/her plate to meet the above needs. Then, pick one or two things that could be done by someone who is not them and offer to do them. If you are a close person and you see these things not done, do them without even asking.

Strengthen your loved one's care circle

Set up a meal train, gofundme, hire services or organize a group to unburden them of responsibilities so they can focus on healing.

Bring levity

Draw on what you know about this person and do not underestimate the power of sparking joy. It does not need to be solely practical to be helpful: flowers, a fancy face serum, a silly TikTok can help.

HOW TO CREATE AN EMOTIONALLY SAFE ENVIRONMENT

Do your own research

Look up resources and be okay with messing up a few times. Remember, you are not replaceable to them. Focus on your personal impact because it's felt most deeply by your close circle and has the power to help and heal, more than you know. Your impact is felt most deeply by your close circle. Care literacy is a life skill that requires continuously showing up for people in ways that do not harm or hinder knowing that each of us will be on the receiving end of this cycle at some point, too.

Grief from loss has no timeline—and showing up days, weeks, and years after the loss is what caring relationships look like. Take care of yourself and honor your own feelings as well.

Shift your language to include these experiences

- Miscarriage = baby who dies before 28 weeks of pregnancy
- Stillbirth = baby who dies at or after 28 weeks
- Infant death = baby who dies after birth
- Rainbow baby = baby born after a pregnancy or infant loss
- TFMR = Terminating (a pregnancy) For Medical Reasons
- Use How many living children do you have? vs How many children do you have?
- Is this your first pregnancy? Will this be your first birth/labor? vs making assumptions about folks without living children

Practice consent, hold space and honor boundaries

When speaking to people who have experienced loss, they often remember small things that people did for them or said to them that really stood out.

One person shared that she received a congratulations card that made him feel validated as a parent. Another shared that strangers offered support and said 'you don't have to repay us or mention this again'.

- Be honest and accountable. "I don't know a lot about this, but I'm going to do my own research and if I mess up I will do my best to change and learn."
- Ask for consent. "Hey I have some support resources that come recommended, are you ready to hear them?"
- Offer trigger warnings when speaking about yours or another person's parenting journey, including loss. Based on where you fall in the ring theory, you may not be in the place to "dump" so you can relate to them. Holding space for listening is powerful.
- Respect and notice their boundaries. If they don't want to come to your baby shower, offer to hang 1:1 another time.
- With consent, shield them from unnecessary emotional labor. "Thanks for telling me you want people to use the term ___ when referring to this, can I relay this to the rest of the family?"
- Be yourself. If you are always cracking jokes or if you're the "Type A" in the group, keep being you. It can feel scary when people change all of a sudden.

PARTNER SUPPORT

If you are the partner of someone who has experienced a loss, you have also experienced a loss and so has your family. You may be in a position where you need to talk about loss or fertility challenges with your other children. How to approach this is dependent on their age and comprehension level. A good rule is to tell them in the clearest way possible what has/is happening and create a dedicated space for them to ask questions. Processing as a family by doing a ceremony or your own special rituals for grieving is bonding and allows your loss to be out in the open. You may also want to ask other adults in your children's lives to follow your lead when talking about the experience. If it feels comfortable, acknowledge and talk about the sibling, some children like to write letters or talk to them too.

You deserve support for your own loss experience. If you can hand off tasks to others and get mental health support, you will be better able to care for yourself and your partner.

Remember that Poppy Seed Health Pregnancy Loss and Grief hotline is for partners as well, it is 24/7 and it is free.