

## Supporting the mental health of bereaved parents after miscarriage, stillbirth and neonatal deaths

### CASE STUDY

Melissa (32) and Cameron (34), both primary school teachers, have been married for five years. Melissa has always had strong maternal feelings and from her early twenties constantly dreamed of having at least four children. Cameron loves kids too, so he was happy to have a large family. Before starting their family, they wanted to set themselves up in a home. They started going out together seriously six years before they were married and began saving straight away and purchased their first home three years after their wedding.

Now they had their home, they started trying for their first baby and it took them twelve months to conceive. Sadly, at 12 weeks Melissa experienced the loss of their baby by miscarriage. The miscarriage rocked them, leaving them both feeling very sad. Their Obstetrician reassured them that miscarriage was quite common and that they should just try again. Six months later they were pregnant. Melissa was constantly seeking reassurance from her Obstetrician as she was fearful of losing another baby. Her Obstetrician always made her feel more positive after each visit. Cameron and other members of her family also offered Melissa reassurance that everything would be fine.

At 20 weeks they discovered they were having a boy. They quickly named him "Oliver". They started purchasing furniture for Oliver's nursery and at 26 weeks they had almost completed the nursery. Early one evening Melissa noticed she

was losing fluid. She called her Obstetrician who asked her to go to her hospital to be assessed. The midwife who conducted the assessment confirmed that her membranes had ruptured and that there was no fetal heartbeat. By this point she was also experiencing regular contractions. Melissa remained in hospital and after five hours in labour delivered her baby, who was stillborn.

Both Melissa and Cameron were heartbroken by the loss. It all seemed so surreal, and Melissa couldn't believe that this was happening again. They decided to leave the hospital on the same day as giving birth and declined most of the opportunities to create memories with him. They wanted to get home, to somewhere familiar, but at the same time grappled with the intense feelings of leaving Oliver behind. The doctor offered a postmortem but they declined because they didn't want to put Oliver through anything more.

On arriving home Melissa was inconsolable and couldn't stop crying. Cameron felt helpless and didn't know what to do to comfort her. Melissa felt like she didn't know what to do next. She sat in Oliver's nursery crying and crying.

Her family called to offer their condolences, and her friends were texting. Her younger sister said, "it was for the best". Melissa couldn't believe her sister said something so flippant. The next day a friend brought them some food. When talking about what happened the friend said, "well

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something must have been wrong with the baby". Melissa couldn't believe people were saying such inconsiderate things. She thought to herself "no one understands". Cameron continued to feel helpless and didn't know what to do. He was also grieving deeply, and experienced people saying things like "it will be ok mate, these things happen for a reason".

Melissa and Cameron held a private funeral for Oliver with no friends or family present. Melissa felt that no one understood what they were going through and wanted to be alone.

At her six week checkup she asked her Obstetrician to explain what went wrong. The doctor said these things happen and she should just keep trying and eventually she will get her baby.

Twelve weeks later, Melissa visited her GP because she was struggling to find answers for herself, she wasn't sleeping well, crying inconsolably daily and was still feeling so empty. She was due to return to work but just couldn't bring herself to face her colleagues. Every time she tried to face the world people said something that was insensitive and upsetting. She also felt she couldn't think straight because she was so sad. At the start of the appointment she discovered the GP didn't know her baby had died, meaning she had to go through her whole story again. The GP suggested a mental health plan and that Melissa see a psychologist to help her process her grief.