

Going Back to Work After a Loss

The decision to return to work is a difficult one that comes with many mixed emotions. You might want some kind of “normalcy” and routine back in your life, but you also might be anxious about seeing all of your co-workers again. Here are a few things that might help both you and your colleagues with this transition.

1. Before going back to work, it might be helpful to have someone you trust send out an email* (or otherwise communicate your loss) to your co-workers. This message can include any or all of the following:
 - a. The news of your loss. According to your own preference, you can give as much or as little information about the loss of your baby. Some have found it beneficial to provide some degree of medical specificity about the death of their baby, as others may be able to provide contacts or additional information in understanding certain medical issues. Also, some find it comforting to provide some detail, as people will “come out of the woodwork” and tell you about their own experiences with pregnancy or infant loss.
 - b. Whether you would like co-workers to attend any funeral and/or memorial service and/or make donations on behalf of your child.
 - c. How you would like people to act towards you upon your return to work: Do you want people to acknowledge your loss (i.e., is it okay for people to talk to you about your baby & his/her death)? Would you prefer to not have your loss brought up at work? Do you need any form of assistance or other considerations (i.e., reduced workload, reduced hours, work on projects that do not exacerbate your grief, etc.?)
 - d. What others may expect of you upon your return to work: grief creates a variety of emotions and others should understand that such emotions are normal and that you may experience such emotions at any time, even at work. It’s also okay to let people know that you may be distracted at times or that your work quality may temporarily differ as a result of your grief. You may also want to inform your co-workers that grief has no schedule and takes on many different forms – your grief may intensify over time and may manifest itself in many different ways.
2. For new or casual acquaintances, it is completely your choice as to whether or not you want to talk about your loss. Grief is a personal experience and you may not feel that it’s necessary to share such deep emotions with such acquaintances.
 - a. Know in advance that some people might not know or have since forgotten that your baby died -- they might ask about how the baby is or notice your smaller belly and assume that everything was ok.... You might want to have a line ready to say to these people: "Thank you so much for asking, but he was stillborn/died/passed away/didn't make it...." Whatever phrasing works best for you.
 - b. Be prepared for the very common question, “Do you have any children?” You might want to come up with an answer in advance so that you’re not put on the spot when this happens. This might be the same answer that you say to people in #a (above). But, it might vary depending on the person and situation. After such encounters, the other person usually feels awful for asking this question, and your instinct might be to console that person. It’s okay to simply say, “You didn’t know/you forgot, and I know you meant well”, and leave it at that.

* See a sample email message at the end of this list (and feel free to change it to meet YOUR needs).

3. Be prepared for insensitive comments (we've heard them all and many more):
"It's all for the best."
"God doesn't give you more than you can handle."
"Don't worry, you can have another."
"At least it happened before you brought the baby home and really got to know it."
"You're young – that's good."
"Time heals all wounds."

People think that they are being helpful, but they have NO clue what is comforting for us. Feel free to respond in whatever way you feel most comfortable. My general response for this is: "I'm not sure if that's how I view things, but, I appreciate your thoughts."

4. Expect that some people might avoid you all together for fear of saying the wrong thing or because they are uncomfortable with the topic of death. Again, respond however you feel comfortable. It's ok to let it go, but, it's also ok to approach that person and say a casual hello.
5. You might find that some people close to you will not react to you and the loss of your baby in the way you would like. You might feel disappointed, resentful, and angry that they are not as sensitive or compassionate as you thought they would be. On the other hand, be mindful that others will pleasantly surprise you with their level of support.
6. It's okay to show emotion and use your baby's name at work. It's actually a way of teaching other people not to avoid the topic all together (if that's what you'd like).
7. Ask someone in your HR department if your office offers any kind of staff support (i.e., counseling services) or if your work insurance covers any part of grief/bereavement therapy.
8. Know that there is no right or wrong way to act. This is a new version of yourself going back to work -- you might be less social, less motivated, more tired, more emotional ... and all of that is okay, ESPECIALLY in the beginning.
9. It's usually difficult to see other pregnant women or hear other co-workers talking about their children. It's even more difficult to hear them complaining or taking these things for granted. Feel free to excuse yourself from these situations or leave the room if these conversations are taking place. Be sure to take care of yourself first.
10. Sometimes taking things one day at a time is too overwhelming. When you feel that way – just take it one moment, one emotion, or one encounter at a time.
11. Do not be surprised if you find your job less fulfilling than before the death of your baby. The experience of losing a baby is life-transforming and makes many people question their goals, achievements, and priorities. It is very common for bereaved parents to not return to work, switch jobs, and/or even change professions. However, try to give yourself some time before making such a big decision.
12. Be gentle with YOURSELF. This is a very difficult step in your grief and healing processes.

Sample email:

Dear colleagues:

As many of you know, my husband, Daniel, and I were expecting our first child this past summer. It saddens me to inform you that our son, Jacob, was stillborn on July 20th, just a few short months ago. While our grief is still incredibly new, we know that we will never fully heal from this loss.

I am sending this message to all of you because I am planning on returning to work this coming week and I couldn't bear to retell this story to each of you separately. Please know that it's ok for you to offer your thoughts and sympathies. It's ok for you to refer to Jacob by his name. And, it's ok for you to check in on me to see how my day is going.

I hope you can also try to understand that I am not the same "Sari" that you all remember from a few months ago. I will absolutely do my best in returning to my position at work. But, please be gentle and patient with me as I find my way back into the daily routine of my job.

We have found a wonderful support group, called the Miscarriage Support Group of Southern California located in Glendale, CA. If you so choose, we would appreciate any donations to this wonderful organization in memory of Jacob. You can donate at: www.cayennewellness.org.

Thank you, in advance, for your support and sensitivity.

Sari