

What To Expect When You're Miscarrying One Woman's Story

This past September 15 was what would have been our due date. But “Wee One,” as we called our pending bundle of joy, was lost long before, on February 29. Spending the day with family helped with closure, but I think I’ll forever have a parallel narrative running through my mind where Wee One will always live.

Leading up to this difficult day, I was trying to make sense of my heightened feelings. I knew I had a lot held inside, and what better way to get them out than to put myself through a teary-eyed movie experience. With the release of *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, I figured I had a pretty good chance of opening the floodgates, and confronting my grief.

But watching that movie, and yes, crying through most of it, not only helped me connect with my sadness, but also some anger. Because I was rudely reminded that the true meaning of the word miscarriage is nowhere to be found in movies or TV shows.

For me, the popular idea of miscarriage — the one presented in this movie and others (*The Help* comes to mind) — was a bubble quickly popped. Furthermore, the distance between that idea, and the brutal physical and emotional reality of the experience, made it all the more difficult to cope. I felt completely surprised and unprepared at every new turn. So if you want to know one woman's true, detailed experience with miscarriage, this is my story.

It started with some mild cramping one Monday afternoon at work. I was nervous at the first pang, so I took a walk to the washroom and found that I was spotting. I think I knew then, but I'd read enough message boards to know that this sort of thing sometimes happens, and for some moms, it all turns out just fine.

I called my doctor, and they scheduled an ultrasound for the next morning, advising me not to worry, stay calm but also that I should go to the hospital if bleeding became heavier. I decided I would be useless at the office, and went home for a long night of waiting and hoping. I was over 11 weeks in, and had just that afternoon begun to contact friends and family inviting them to dinners where we'd share our big news.

Although my fiancé, Gerhard, and I are in a long-distance relationship (he is in San Diego, and I am in Toronto) he dropped everything to be with me. In the meantime, my mom made the three-hour drive from Port Elgin. So before I go further, I want to say thank you to them for their tremendous love and support. I simply don't know what I would have done without them.

The next morning, mom and I drove to Sunnybrook Hospital to find out Wee One's fate. That night, the bleeding had continued, and was comparable to a light period. I didn't have high hopes, but couldn't allow myself to give up. The ultrasound technician

is not allowed to share what they see, but you didn't have to be an ultrasound technician to know that the doctor would not be bringing good news. If I could have a redo, I would have tried my best not to sneak peeks at the screen because to me it looked like our baby was in pieces.

The doctor didn't have to say a word — his face was all the information I needed. He said, "It doesn't look good." By his approximation, Wee One had passed away about three weeks before. Just days after I'd seen our baby's little heart beat for the first and last time. All that was left now was what the medical teams call "product" — blood, tissue and a lifeless fetus.

My heart broke in a thousand pieces. One for every hope and dream, every carefully laid plan, each potential name on the list I kept in my purse. The doctor was trying to get through a speech I know he's probably delivered a thousand times, about how it's not my fault, there was nothing I did or didn't do, and it's a very common thing. But my mind was racing to figure out exactly what I'd done to cause this, what I could have done to prevent it, and struggling with how very alone I felt, knowing that Wee One was gone.

Since the miscarriage path my body was now irrevocably heading down was what's called missed miscarriage — meaning that even though our baby had died, my body was trying to stay pregnant — I was dealt insult to injury. The doctor explained I would have to deliver, and there were three ways to get to the same hopeless conclusion. First choice, we could schedule an operation called a D&C (dilation and curettage). It's considered safe, but with any operation there is always risk and he expressed concern that there could be scarring incurred that could affect future fertility. So that was out. Next choice was to let nature take its course, and since it had already taken over three weeks to get to this point, the doctor advised that prolonging this difficult experience may not be my best choice. So he presented option three: a prescription medication that's meant for kidney stones or some such unrelated issue, normally taken orally, but in this case, to be inserted vaginally. This, he said, would get the process started.

With my prescription and my sentence, we headed down to the lab to provide a blood sample — the first of many I was soon to find out. We left the hospital heavy-headed and teary-eyed and picked up the script. All over it were warnings about how dangerous it is for a pregnant woman. My brain balked. After so many weeks of carefully monitoring everything for the health and safety of our baby, those little warning stickers were stark reminders of my new reality.

The doctor recommended taking the pills around 6 p.m. He told me what would follow would be just like a very heavy period. And maybe for some women, that's true. But I wish he had said, "It could also be the worst, most painful night of your life." Because although that is truly terrible news, at least I would have had some idea of what could transpire.

My cramps stopped being cramps around the time I was supposed to take the pills. I debated about whether or not to use them but since they'd been described as a way not to prolong what was inevitable, I decided to go ahead. That's when cramps turned into contractions.

Every three to five minutes, my entire body would tense. There was no way to be comfortable. I tried lying back, sitting up, all-fours, cat-cows, walking, lying on my stomach, mountain climbers — everything. There was no sleep that night.

It was my second sleepless night of almost-parenthood. The first was the night we found out we'd be a family. Gerhard and I had spent Christmas with his relatives on the West Coast and I was just settling into the new year back in Toronto when I started noticing the early symptoms. I'm an elite mountain biker, in great shape, I don't smoke, or drink (much) and I'm not overweight. Being an athlete, I'm also keenly aware of my body, even its most innocuous changes. I took the home pregnancy test mainly to stop my mind from racing through all the exciting what-ifs. I thought, "I'll take the test, get the negative result, and then get some sleep." Instead, I made the most important phone call of my life, and told Gerhard that he was going to be a dad. We talked all through the night. We planned out the next five years in as many hours, deciding we'd spend my maternity leave as a little family in California before moving back to Toronto where I could resume my career.

We weren't expecting to be expecting, but welcomed Wee One, full-steam ahead. I shared our news with a close friend — who was also expecting, unexpectedly — and she told me all about the symptoms I could look forward to, asked how I was feeling, and shared some of her own experiences. She also told me how one in four pregnancies don't get out of the first trimester. She said I probably wouldn't have to worry, and I thought, "There's no way that could happen to me."

Even as it was happening to me, I still couldn't accept it. In that way, the pain served as a helpful distraction. There was no way to process what was happening to us emotionally while I was in the travails of what I call "junior labour."

Around midnight, Gerhard arrived at my bedroom door while my mom was still outside paying the cab driver. He hadn't even taken off his coat and when he pulled me into his arms, he smelled like outside. The look on his face when I saw him seeing me is forever burned into my memory.

The rest of the night was more of the same, until I guess eventually the contractions paused long enough to fall asleep. I woke up feeling groggy, and I remember thinking, "I'm glad that's over so now I can just go back to being pregnant." And then it all hit home again.

But I hadn't even started.

I crawled to the bathroom and began to understand what having a miscarriage is actually all about. “Product” fell out of me, at once providing relief and more misery and heartbreak. I couldn’t help but wonder, were these dark masses of tissue our baby? Would I now have to flush them down the toilet? I spent the morning trying to find a comfortable position, suffering through more contractions, and changing pads while Gerhard and my mom supervised, calling the doctor to ask questions, and make sure that I did my best to eat and drink.

Sometime that afternoon, everything ramped up again even worse than the night before. I couldn’t keep up with the bleeding, and I couldn’t manage anything but all fours. We decided it was time to get help. Gerhard had to carry me out of the apartment. I lay in the backseat in what felt like one big contraction for the longest trip across town of my life.

At the hospital, I was brought in to the ER. There were endless rounds of IV, blood tests and lab work. I was only barely present. Then a team from gynecology arrived. This was the first time Gerhard had heard “the speech” — my heart broke all over again, watching him absorb the information, and try to accept that this time, we wouldn’t be having a family.

Once my family had left the room, the doctor did what she could to manually remove the “product” blocking my cervix. Results started to come back from the lab, and after being promised we could go home around 9 p.m., at 11 p.m. it was decided that I ought to be admitted. Words like “surgery” and “transfusion” were being exchanged by the doctors and nurses. By this time, I was too weak to care.

My supporters slipped out for some overnight essentials from a 24-hour grocery store and I drifted in and out of sleep. I teetered back and forth to the ER washroom using my IV tree for support, knowing full well that everyone could see up the back of my blood-stained hospital gown. Thankfully, the contractions seemed to have worn themselves out. By 3am, the orderlies finally arrived to move us to my room. With my missed miscarriage turning into an incomplete abortion, we’d officially been admitted. Mom found a bench in the cafeteria, and Gerhard curled up with me in my hospital bed where we listened to three other ladies fight their illnesses all night.

I had a vaginal ultrasound scheduled first thing that morning. Some product was still trapped in my uterus, measuring four by four inches. It had to be removed because otherwise I could be at risk for an infection, and other complications and my body didn’t seem to be able to do it on its own. Another IV. Another session with the kind gynecologist and her evil speculum. She called my bleeding “impressive,” with no hint of irony. Thanks to her, I narrowly avoided the D&C surgery. She was so happy when she tugged out the four by four mass they were looking for, I thought she wanted applause. “I just saved you a surgery,” she said. Part of me did want to cheer. It was over. But ... it was over.

What followed was another vaginal ultrasound to confirm she'd got everything, and then more fluids to help get my energy up. Everything felt stretched, raw, and achy after the egress — and ingress — over the past couple of days. By 7 p.m. I got to eat for the first time since arriving at the hospital the afternoon before (it was hospital food, but it was the best food I've ever tasted). And by about 10 p.m., we were told we could go home.

Gerhard carried me back in to the apartment — I had lost so much blood, I couldn't stand without fainting. He gave me a bath. My mom helped pack us up the next morning, and we drove to my hometown where the whole family could take care of both of us. For the next few days, we just laid on the couch watching Netflix, feeling numb, and crying when we felt like it.

Back in Toronto, I was due at the hospital for follow up. Gerhard and I saw my obstetrician and he gave us "the speech," again. He let us ask him all our questions about what we could have done to prevent it or cause it. He gently reminded us that it was just nature's way of correcting what could not be. We wondered aloud in the car ride home what kind of mutant we had created that was not fit for this earth.

For the next six or eight weeks, I was back to the hospital regularly to have my blood tested, and make sure my hormones were returning to normal. Every trip was another gut-wrenching experience. I'd see my OB and wait for him with all the new moms-to-be. They'd be there with their husbands or boyfriends, rubbing their bellies, and sometimes even having the audacity to look bored. I tried to read whatever tired gossip rag was around through the tears pouring down my face. It wasn't a comfortable waiting room for anyone. Before I could get back in my car, I'd have to have a cathartic sob fest in the park nearby just to be able to move forward.

Fast forward to today, and I'm still dealing with the lingering effects. I still think of Wee One every day. I'm doing all I can to get into my best health which has also included repairing my iron and B12 levels, and finding out about extensive food allergies, so a lot has changed. I still feel light-headed whenever my period arrives, which is on a completely different schedule than it was before. There's a lot to get used to.

Sometimes I wonder if being vitamin B12 deficient is because of my impressive blood loss. Or did I miscarry because of low vitamin B12? Was my constant craving for noodles — the wheat in which it turns out I'm allergic to — the reason I lost our baby? Maybe I shouldn't have kept up my indoor cycling habits. But I'm learning to adhere to 'the speech' and accept that there was nothing I could have done. Because if I'd known that I was allergic to wheat (and everything else), I would have immediately stopped eating it. If I'd known I was low in B12, I would have done everything I could to correct it. Healing is a long process, both for the body and the spirit.

That's why when I see miscarriage in a movie or TV and it's presented as a terrible few minutes in the washroom, after which your mom, or a friend tucks you into bed with a

cup of tea before you get on with life, I get upset. For me, it wasn't like that at all. It's a long, drawn-out experience that most of us are left to deal with on our own — long past the follow-up appointments and the time we feel our friends and family would prefer to stop talking about it. With one in four women who get those pink double lines experiencing the hot, painful, sticky truth of miscarriage, I think we should acknowledge the facts. I think we should talk about it. I don't think TLC should do "A Miscarriage Story" or anything like that. But I do think we should make room for women who've been through it to share their stories, and just listen. And I hope women who have miscarried do find a way to talk it through, and heal.

Criticizing Hollywood for a less-than-accurate view of life I realize is not the best use of time. We could argue that the same distance between fact and fiction in giving birth is a problem. All I can say is that I hope one day soon to find out the differences between what's real and imagined in that life event, too.

By Kristen Lake.