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## 'I was hanging by a thread': Coping with the emotional toll of 3 miscarriages



Ms Marian Nathan, her husband Andre Fletcher and their children (from left) Shane Luke, Kimberly Anne, Scarlett Rose and Cody Matthew Fletcher. ST PHOTO: CHONG JUN LIANG



**Amrita Kaur**

UPDATED 7 HOURS AGO ▾

SINGAPORE – On the eve of Ms Marian Nathan's first wedding anniversary in 2011, she was woken up by pain and a gushing feeling.

She thought she was peeing on the bed and tried to squeeze her pelvic muscles to stop the flow, but then realised her water bag had broken and she was going into labour.

She was 15 weeks pregnant then.

"As my husband rushed me to the hospital, all I could think was 'not again, not again,'" says Ms Nathan, a 34-year-old civil servant.

By their first wedding anniversary in 2011, the couple had already gone through two miscarriages. She lost her first child at 17 weeks and second at 15 weeks.

Ms Nathan and her husband, Mr Andre Fletcher, spent their first wedding anniversary in the hospital battling all sorts of negative emotions, from anger to anguish to emptiness.

She had a third miscarriage when she was six weeks pregnant in 2012.

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Dr Lim Whui Whui, associate consultant at Singapore General Hospital's department of obstetrics and gynaecology, says about one in five pregnancies end in a miscarriage and 80 per cent of miscarriages occur in the first trimester.

Various cultures tacitly acknowledge this statistic and pregnancies are often not announced till the second trimester.

There are many causes of miscarriage and they are often unknown, she notes.

"The top identifiable cause of miscarriage is chromosome problems, in which the foetus has either too many or too few chromosomes and hence is not able to develop properly. In most cases, these errors occur by chance and are not inherited from the parents," says Dr Lim.

The age of the woman getting pregnant also affects the miscarriage rate.

In those below 30, Dr Lim says miscarriage occurs in one in 10 pregnancies, increasing to two in 10 at 35 years of age and four in 10 at 40 years of age.

"This increase is likely due to an increase in the rate of chromosomal abnormalities in the eggs of older women."

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Dr Liu Shuling, senior consultant at KK Women's and Children's Hospital's (KKH) department of reproductive medicine, says women with antiphospholipid syndrome (in which the immune system mistakenly creates antibodies that attack tissues in the body); poorly controlled medical conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes and thyroid disorders; high body mass index; and those who smoke are also at higher risk of having a miscarriage.

There are often myths surrounding miscarriages, but there is no truth to them, she says.

For example, having sex during pregnancy or consuming coconut, watermelon, nuts or prawns does not increase the risk of a miscarriage, says Dr Liu.

"If the pregnant woman is able to eat these foods before pregnancy and is not allergic to them, she can still take them in moderation. But she needs to ensure that the seafood is thoroughly cooked to eliminate the bacteria," she adds.

In Ms Nathan's case, her first two pregnancy losses were due to a medical condition called incompetent cervix. It occurs when the cervix opens, weakens or shortens too early in a pregnancy.

She was diagnosed with the condition after the second miscarriage. Her third miscarriage happened because the baby was not developing the way it should.

## Dealing with the losses

Coping with three consecutive pregnancy losses was tough.

Says Ms Nathan: “I was hanging by a thread daily, going back to work to try and get some semblance of normality, and the odd colleague might come by and ask about the pregnancy or how was the baby. And it took all of me to hold it in for the duration of the conversation before I would go to the bathroom to cry.”

It was a “huge emotional roller coaster”, says Ms Nathan.

Her husband, Mr Fletcher, was also “devastated”.

“I used the feeling of wanting to start a family to give me strength to cope with the loss and to focus on making a baby instead of feeling the loss of losing one,” says the 38-year-old service technician.

Experts tell The Straits Times that a miscarriage can cause intense feelings of loss, and it is important not to rush the grieving process.

Dr Liu says women often blame themselves for the loss.

She says patients’ immediate reactions span myriad emotions such as denial, grief, anger and depression. “I always tell them it is not their fault and that a miscarriage is not within their control,” she adds.

Dr Lim says some couples can be shocked and confused when they find out they have miscarried.

“They may have many questions about how the miscarriage happened and what symptoms could have warned them of it. They may want to know immediately what the next steps are and what to expect,” she says.

Some may remain silent and take a while to process the news and their feelings, says Dr Lim.

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## Trying again

Despite undergoing three miscarriages, the thought of not having a child did not cross the minds of Ms Nathan and her husband.

“We tried to conceive for months and months, and still I got my period every month. I remember feeling so miserable. First, it seemed that my problem was keeping a pregnancy, but now, even getting pregnant was a problem. After almost a year of trying with no results, we turned to assisted reproductive technology,” says Ms Nathan.

The couple welcomed their first son in July 2014 after an in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) procedure. She conceived her second son naturally, and her two younger daughters through IVF. Her children are now aged nine, eight, six and three.

To treat Ms Nathan’s weak cervix, she had a cerclage for all four of her pregnancies. This refers to a procedure in which the cervical opening is closed with stitches to prevent or delay pre-term birth.

The stitches were removed at week 37, at which point the baby is considered full term.

Having been pregnant seven times, Ms Nathan feels “extremely blessed” to have her four children. “I got my dream of a busy house, and children with a small age gap,” she says.

Like her, entrepreneur Vernessa Chuah, 38, has also had three pregnancy losses.

She had her first miscarriage at the age of 18 with no known cause, while her second happened when the baby’s heartbeat stopped in the 10th week of her pregnancy at age 29.

During her third pregnancy at age 31, the baby had a birth defect called omphalocele, where the infant’s intestines, liver or other organs stick outside of the belly through the belly button.

After consulting her doctor and careful consideration, she and her husband made the decision to terminate the pregnancy.

“That was the hardest week of my life. The unplanned losses were much easier. The babies made the call that they were not fit enough to survive. This one – I made the call,” says Ms Chuah, who is married and has a five-year-old daughter, Elvanna Tsui.



Ms Vernessa Chuah with her five-year-old daughter Elvanna Tsui. PHOTO: LOKHIN TSUI

Speaking about her losses, she adds: “Initially, I felt inadequate or like something was missing. I just wanted to get back on my feet quickly. Over the years, the losses have taught me to accept and love myself. It’s not about what I do or offer, but who I am.”

In many cases, Dr Lim says the cause of miscarriage is not known and hence cannot be prevented.

However, there are some precautions that women can take to lower the risk of miscarriage. This includes not smoking, eating a balanced diet and exercising regularly to maintain a healthy weight, say doctors.

“If a woman has any medical conditions, it is best to get these conditions well under control prior to trying for a pregnancy again. While trying, she should take folic acid and not take excessive caffeine or alcohol,” advises Dr Lim.