

Grit 'n' Grace — THE PODCAST

Episode #240: Real Talk About Pregnancy Loss (Part 2)

Amy Carroll

You know, Cheri, after our first conversation with Rachel – and today is the second conversation, for those of you that are listening, you should go listen to part one first.

Cheri Gregory

Oh, yeah.

Amy Carroll

But if you don't have time, this will stand alone. But Rachel is incredibly credible. Not only has she done her research, obviously – like, I felt like we just got the tip of the iceberg with her, even in both of these conversations. She knows so much. She's so well researched. But she's experienced all of it.

Cheri Gregory

Absolutely. In fact, one of the taglines on her website is 'When building a family is just a little bit complicated.' And in her case, that's an understatement.

Amy Carroll

It really is. I've been following her on social media. We've met in person too, at a conference, but I've been following her on social media for a long time. And I was like, 'Wow.' I mean, she has done every iteration of having children and or adopting children, all of it.

Cheri Gregory

Yeah. In fact, I'm going to go ahead and share just a little bit from her website here so that our friends who are listening get to know Rachel a little bit more the way that we know her. And so here's what it says on Rachel Lewis's website. She says, 'My story is complicated.' Aren't they all. And then she goes on to say 'I always wanted four kids. I currently have four in my home. But getting to today has been quite a journey. I've given birth twice. The first time I experienced birth, trauma and life threatening complications for both me and my baby, followed by postpartum depression. The second time was an incredibly challenging pregnancy after loss, followed by a very redemptive birth and a beautiful rainbow baby. In between births, we had five pregnancy losses, a ruptured ectopic pregnancy, and four early miscarriages. I was diagnosed with unexplained secondary infertility and recurrent pregnancy loss. During the course of our journey to family, we had a hope for adoptive placement fall through. We met and adopted one daughter and fostered a son whom we returned his biological family, only to have him be a temporary part of our family yet again, years later. See, I told you, it's complicated.'

Amy Carroll

So complicated. And yet I'm thankful that Rachel is willing to tell those stories to those of us who have things to learn from her. And as you'll hear today, we all have something to learn from Rachel.

Cheri Gregory

Absolutely.

Well, this is Cheri Gregory –

Amy Carroll

– and I'm Amy Carroll –

Cheri Gregory

– and you're listening to Grit'N'Grace: The Podcast that equips you to lose who you're not love who you are, and live your one life well.

Amy Carroll

Today, we've invited Rachel Lewis back again. She's the author of *Unexpected: Real Talk on Pregnancy Loss*. And after last week's interview, we felt like rather than having a convo between the two of us, we needed Rachel to help us all of us to become more grief literate.

Cheri Gregory

Today's episode is made possible in partnership with Compassion International.

Amy Carroll

Compassion International helps children flourish. Through a relationship with a local church and a caring sponsor, a child is able to discover his or her true value.

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Amy Carroll

And when you sponsor a Compassion child by visiting gritngracethepodcast.com/compassion, you'll receive a copy of our co-authored book, *Exhale*, for free.

Rachel, we are so grateful to have you back again, to help us all become a little more grief literate. We really want to be the kind of people who create environments in which healing is possible after pregnancy loss. But we don't know what we don't know.

When you lose a baby, suddenly, you're faced with a barrage of decisions that need to be made. What are some tips that you have for us that can help a bereaved parent through those difficult decisions? And what do they do after time has passed if they regret the decisions that they made in the moment?

Rachel Lewis

Before we even talk about the tips, I think it's really important to just address the fact that pregnancy loss is often traumatizing. And when you're in the middle of a loss, that means you're in the middle of trauma, and trauma can rewire your brain whether that is just temporary, like in the moment, or that sort of continues on past the actual event.

But in that moment, while you're making these decisions, I think it's important to recognize that you don't have access physiologically to the parts of your brain that help you make what we would consider rational decisions that align with your goals and your values. And instead, your body is simply geared to survive. So your body is in and your mind is in fight, flight, freeze, and fawn mode. And so if you feel like you're having difficulty making decisions, even simple decisions, like 'What am I going to eat today?' that is a big reason why.

So I just want to assure you that your brain is doing what it believes it needs to do to survive. And your difficulty and making decisions is not your fault. But there are some things that you can do to kind of help you, you know, one of the things you can do, if you find that you are in that fight, flight, freeze, or fawn mode is to use some grounding techniques. First, things like recognizing five things in the room and labeling them out loud, or picking a color and looking around your environment. And noticing all the places that you can see that color or doing some breathing exercises. So those are things you can do in the moment, if you can, before you make a decision to help tamper down that trauma response as much as possible.

I think simplifying the decisions you don't have to make – so if there's a decision that you don't have to make, or you can delegate, allow someone else to make that for you, or just put it off. There are a lot of decisions that have to be made during and after pregnancy loss. And so you just don't need to be burdened by anything that is unnecessary at this point. For those decisions you can assign a point person to help coordinate your care. That way, instead of having five people come up to you and say, 'Well, what what meal can I bring you this week?' you're talking to one person, and you can share, 'I have to have my laundry done. And I need to decide what meals we're going to have. And I need to do all these things. Can I delegate this to you? Can you do this and then coordinate with other people?'

That also is a form of simplification, right? You're just communicating with one person. When you're faced with a difficult decision, there can be a temptation to try to get more information than is possible. Unfortunately, in time sensitive decisions, more information is not always possible. And sometimes it can complicate things. So I encourage people to make the decision with the information that you either have, or will reasonably be able to get and make the decision that makes the most sense for you right now.

So don't project yourself into the future saying, '10 years from now, what do I think I would have wanted?' Bring it back to the present and say 'Right now, in this moment, what do I need to be more okay with my loss? This loss is not okay. But what do I need to help myself be more okay in the midst of this loss?' That's really kind of the what I would recommend for somebody who's grieving.

And then like you said, there's always the possibility that someone could regret the decision. Actually, when I was doing research, I was surprised to find out that studies

show that people are actually really poor predictors of what they're going to do in the future. We think we're going to know – a lot of times we'll look at somebody else's situation, and we'll be like, well, if I were in that situation, this is what I would do. And it turns out, we're terrible at figuring that out. So your present self cannot know what your future self is going to regret.

And when you try to hold yourself – let's say you do regret a decision, and now you're looking back on a decision that you've previously made, there can be a tendency to try to hold yourself to the standard of the information that you have now, with hindsight, and then to be like be self-incriminating to say 'I should have known this, therefore, I was wrong.' No, you weren't wrong. You made the right decision that you could you did the best you could under the worst circumstances of your life in that moment.

Cheri Gregory

That's so freeing. That is so incredibly freeing, especially for any of us who have any tendency towards perfectionism, where we immediately grasp for any evidence to beat ourselves up with.

Amy Carroll

That sounds like great advice for people in any hard situation. So I think we can extrapolate those truths out into whatever situations we're living in.

Cheri Gregory

Absolutely.

So Rachel, you say – and this, I have to admit, was just like... I don't wanna say news for me, I had just never thought of it in these terms. You say that when a baby dies,

the role of the parents as mother or father do not die with them. So how can a mother or father parent a baby after it has died?

Rachel Lewis

Yeah. This in practice was not news to me, because I think I had done it immediately after my loss, I think it was just a natural way that I grieved. And so I understood the practice of it, I just didn't know that there was a technical name for it, which is called continuing bonds. And it's this grief theory, which – ironically, it sort of came about through a group of bereaved parents, they're the ones who brought to the forefront, that this is a valid way to grieve.

So the idea, like you said, is that the bonds that we created with our loved ones extends past death, just like if your sister died, she will always be your sister. And death changes the relationship, it changes the proximity, it changes how you relate to your sister, but your identity hasn't changed, and her identity to you has not changed.

And so continuing bonds says 'I am my child's mother,' or 'I am my child's father,' for men. And I will always be that. And the way that I show that isn't going to look like taking my son to a T-ball game or inviting everyone to the piano recital, or even walking my daughter down the aisle. But it can still be both a private act of parenting and a community act of parenting. So ideas of like private acts of parenting would be like naming your baby, keeping your baby's things close by, or creating a space for them in your home; wearing memorial jewelry or planting a memorial garden, looking through your baby's photos, maybe sharing your birth story or sharing photos online to sort of invite your community in; hanging just an empty stocking for Christmas, or perhaps purchasing gifts in your child's name for other kids who need Christmas gifts.

So it could also look like just in community I might invite someone to my daughter's recital, I might invite you to help participate in like a remembrance walk. Come walk with me, as we remember maybe, or raise funds for pregnancy loss organization. It could be joining a support group posting on social media, inviting your family to come sing Happy Birthday on their first birthday, even though they're not there. So there's ways that we can show that our relationship is still valid and worthy of honor and worthy of respect. And our children are so worth remembering, even if our time with them has been cut short.

Amy Carroll

Beautiful suggestions. Grieving as a family is really hard. You have to nurture your own grief while taking care of the grief of your loved ones. What are some tips that a parent can use to help their child through the loss of their sibling?

Rachel Lewis

Yeah, that's an interesting one, though. One thing that I will say before I even answer that question is to recognize that studies show that no matter how young a child is, they can grieve. And they can understand that something has shifted. Even an infant breastfeeding can taste the difference in hormones, they can feel the difference in stress. So there is no child too young to be affected by the loss of their sibling. And this even includes children who are born after loss. So it's not just the children who experienced a loss, but also the ones who come after. It's really a family loss that affects the whole dynamic of the family. So when you are dealing with a child who is asking about what happened, it's really important to call death what it is.

And a simple way to do that is to say death is where the body stops breathing. There's no more pain, there's no suffering, it's a permanent thing. This is not going to change. So if you call something not death, I'll say you call it sleep, then your child might be

afraid to fall asleep. Because they might be afraid that that means that they're going to die. Or if you say they just went to heaven, then your child might say, well, if she went there, then she can come back. So children need concrete answers, because they are concrete thinkers. So be simple in your language, make sure it's age appropriate, but definitely call death what it is.

I would say feel your feelings in front of them. Now I'm not at saying you should rely on your four year old for all of your grief support, that would be a ridiculous thing to say. Children, like I said, they're very perceptive. So even if they don't know the right story to attach the feelings that they're sensing at home, they can still sense the feelings, but they will attach a story to it. So by you feeling the feelings and giving them the narrative – for instance, if you're really stressed because you have a difficult decision to make, and you're exhausted, you can verbalize 'Mommy is so tired, and mommy wants to make a good decision. And mommy's just feeling a little overwhelmed right now,' and you can make sure they know it's not about them, like 'You have been such a beautiful helpful support, mommy is so thankful for you.'

So you can say things like that and give them the narrative so that they don't fill in the blanks with something wrong and something inaccurate, like 'Mommy must just be so mad at me because I did this.' So, that's really important.

And by you feeling your feelings in front of them, you're teaching them regulation, when they see that it's safe to enter into the deep feelings, that it doesn't persist forever, that they can then sort of move out of them and come back, and that it's okay to express those feelings, and it's safe. So when you model regulation to your kids, that is the best way for them to learn to regulate. And that also gives them permission to grieve. I think it's really important to offer professional services, when needed. And then also give them a support circle, let other people love on your children, and

encourage their connection to your baby, they may want to go to the gravesite and put something on the grave or put something in the coffin to go with the baby, they may want to go to the funeral. So let them make those choices in their own grief process and try to honor that as best as you can.

Cheri Gregory

You know, so much of this is so different from how some of us were raised.

Amy Carroll

It is stunning, isn't it?

Cheri Gregory

Yeah, even just listening to you say to feel your feelings in front of them. And having to remind myself you didn't say have a full on meltdown of reactivity, you said feel your emotions in front of them. And as a part of them learning regulation, that is so incredibly valuable. And for some – most of us, very, very different.

So speaking of different, in the first part of our time together, you talked about what not to say when someone finds out that a loved one is grieving the loss of a baby. Could you elaborate on what we can do? How can we show active support maybe immediately after the loss and then also long term? I'll just speak for myself, I'm often afraid to do anything later on because I don't want to make people feel worse by bringing up bad memories. But I'm thinking that's an old school way of thinking of things.

Rachel Lewis

It is. It's like if – and I keep going back to other family relationships, just because I think that's easier for us to grasp. But let's say your mom died, and it's Christmas

time, you're gonna be thinking of your mom whether or not you're talking about it, or whether there's any sort of outward demonstration of like your mom missing, you're going to be thinking about it, you haven't forgotten that your mom died. So if somebody were to say, 'Hey, I just want you to know, I'm thinking of you right now. Because I know you're probably wishing your mom are here with you. And I just want you to know I'm holding space for that.' That's not gonna remind you that your mom died, right? You already know.

But what it does do is it gives you permission to, if you want to, if you need to, to know that that's a safe person that you can talk to about your loss if you choose. And if you don't want to, then just say thank you so much for thinking of me. And then you can move on.

So long term, I would definitely say yes, say their name. If a person has named their baby, then that name is important. It offers validity that this child was not just a pregnancy, but that they were an individual that is missing from that home and from that family. So use the name – you could even do things since the holidays are coming up, you could even do things like include that child's name on the Christmas card you send out. Very simple, but also very inclusive things.

As we know, pregnancy and infant loss Awareness Month is October, so October can be an excellent time for you to reach out to your loved one on October 15. That is the actual Awareness Day and all around the globe at 7:00 pm, people are lighting their candles in memory of their baby. So a really simple way of remembering that parent child with them is to simply light a candle, take a picture and say I'm thinking of you.

And another way is anniversaries can be incredibly difficult. So if you know their due date, their estimated due date, or their date of their loss, or that child's birthday –

sometimes there's all three dates. But if you can put that in your phone for a year ahead of time, and set an alert to remind yourself to like reach out to them that day, that would be an amazing show of support for the long term for people who want immediate support.

I often refer to the definition of social support from Dr. Bessel Van der Kolk, from *The Body Keeps the Score*. And I can't remember if I shared this the first time, but in case I haven't, or if I have, it's probably worth repeating. He says social support is the issue of reciprocity of being seen, being heard, being held in the safety of someone else's mind, and just having that visceral feeling of safety. So when you're thinking 'what can I do for this person?' you can use those principles as a sort of a filter of like, 'Does this action help them feel seen? Does it help them feel heard? Is it providing for their physical needs in a way that it helps them feel safe? Do they feel held physically, or just that I'm holding space for them, I'm a safe person for them to be with?'

So as far as seeing someone, if they're putting things on social media, respond, comment, like, show them that they're not just speaking into the void, but that there's people there that care, as you're invited into their house, go, even if you're like afraid that you're going to say the wrong thing, or it's going to be awkward and silent, you don't know what to do, still go. And let them set the pace for what they need, and recognize that you're there to hear them. You don't have to provide any answers whatsoever. You don't have to comfort them, you can simply be there with them, and show that you're actively listening, that in and of itself is comforting.

And then, like I said, the visceral feeling of safety, having that point person that can coordinate that care to make sure that their physiological needs are met and taken care of, because a person can't start to really grieve and heal when they're faced with 'What am I going to feed my kids? How am I going to get my kids to school? There's

no laundry in the house.' So taking care of those things frees up their emotional energy to be able to grieve, you're just taking care of that feeling of safety, and then physical touch can be so important. As long as you have that relationship with them. Physical touch is one of those ways that so clearly demonstrates love and affection and compassion. So as long as that's appropriate in your relationship, that can be a really helpful tool.

Amy Carroll

Well, we are fast approaching the holiday season. Thanksgiving decorations and even Christmas trees are in Hobby Lobby already. So help us out as we think forward into the holidays. Why are the holidays exponentially more difficult than other times of the year?

Rachel Lewis

Well, I think holidays are meant for making memories, right? And when you've had a loss, you've made all the memories you get to make. And I think that the holidays can be a very stark reminder that you don't have any more of those wonderful memories of opening presents or sitting under the tree or sharing a Thanksgiving meal around the table. So that can be hard. And there's this expectation to be merry, right? We always say Merry Christmas, like be happy. And that's just a lot of pressure on somebody who's grieving and is grieving through a difficult time of just to feel like they are the burden. Like if they go to a Christmas party, they're the downer. So that can be hard.

I think – this is a very specific thing, but it was hard for me. So I'm going to share Christmas was difficult for me because it was around a baby. And there were images of pregnant Mary and there were plays during church, and all of a sudden a beautiful newborn baby was the focus of everything. And walking through five years of loss and infertility, those were hard images, to sort of separate in my mind, like yes, that is true.

And that's what Christmas is and that's what we celebrate. And that's a good thing. And also, this is a visual representation of what I'm grieving.

And so for me at least, and probably I imagined for other loss parents, pregnancy loss and infant loss parents, that narrative around a newborn can be difficult. I also think that there's just a lot of decisions to be made. I mean, just a normal everyday person can get overwhelmed by the holidays. There's all these events to attend or plan, these busy schedules that are packed, and you got to fit everything in. And then you've got the burden that – well, for some, it's a burden, a financial burden of trying to provide gifts for all the appropriate people and then making all of those decisions, there's so many decisions that have to be made. So this is just an extra layer of difficulty on somebody who is already having difficulty with executive functioning as it is.

Cheri Gregory

Okay, so you just brought up so many things that would never, ever have crossed my mind. But that make so, so much sense. So thank you for all the ways you're opening our eyes here.

Now shifting ever so slightly here, Amy and I are big believers in both counseling and in coaching. So could you share with our friends who are listening, the difference between counseling and coaching? And then why someone who's experienced a pregnancy loss might choose to add a coach to their support team, especially close to the holidays?

Rachel Lewis

I am a big fan of therapy, licensed therapy. So let me qualify it. I think that a pastor can offer wonderful spiritual support. If you are looking for counseling, I do recommend going with a licensed counselor because those people have the expertise to

understand trauma, to understand grief, to understand loss in a way that's not taught at seminary. So those things can enhance – spiritual support can go in hand with counseling, coaching can be just another arm of support, really another way to reach out and to feel supported by someone.

Counseling is more focused on in a sense of the past, but really reconciling who you were in the past, what happened to you in the past, how that's affecting you today, ways that maybe you've had some like behaviors or things like that, that are rooted in what happened, and they're not serving you. So exploring those issues and exploring like, okay, how can I change this, and counseling also addresses things like postpartum depression, postpartum anxiety, PTSD, so if you have a complicating mental health factor, you definitely want a counselor, as someone on your team to help you work through that.

Coaching, when I think of coaching, I think of like literal sports, like if we were on a football team together, a coach would not be the person who's going to say, 'Well, tell me about your childhood, and how that affected how you're going to kick the ball.' That's probably not the depth they're going to go into, right. But they're going to say, 'Here's a ball, let me show you how to kick it. And I know you'll kick it at the end.'

(All laugh)

Cheri Gregory

We're running with this metaphor, no problem, we're running with it.

(All laugh)

Rachel Lewis

And so think that of coaching, as you know, there can be some level of expertise, it is not the same level of expertise as you'll get from a mental health counselor, but part of their expertise is coming from having been there. So it can be more of a peer to peer or a I'm just a little bit ahead of you, but I've walked that path, and I know some of the pitfalls that you are likely to encounter. And I just want to help provide a map for kind of where you're at and just help you along this journey, and help give you some of the skills that you may need just to be able to keep walking long.

So during the holidays, I would think of this as being 'Let me help you figure out what traditions need to change. Let's talk about how can you talk about your loss with your loved ones when it comes up at family events. Let's talk about some responses that you might have when you're surrounded by people that are all of a sudden giving you a lot of platitudes. Or if you feel like your baby's being forgotten during the traditions, how can we help continue those bonds during this holiday season? How can we make sure that you are reserving some time and some space in your emotional energy to take care of your grief and take care of yourself in the midst of this busy season?' So those are kind of some of those just skills that I think a coach or someone who's gone ahead of you and has experienced the terrain can really just sort of help you and just be an additional branch of support.

Amy Carroll

Well, Rachel, as Cheri said, this has been eye opening, clarifying, so, so helpful on every level.

What closing words do you have for our friends who are listening about creating and finding environments where healing can take place after pregnancy loss?

Rachel Lewis

I would first remind you that those environments are out there. And you might not have them right now. But there are people who are willing to go the distance with you and your grief. And it might not be the people that you expected, it might not be the people that you were super close with right now, it could be that random Facebook friend across the world that you haven't met in person who all of a sudden becomes like a huge supporter.

And there's different ways you can look for that support professional support, like we talked about just a minute ago, community support, support groups, like my Brave Mamas group, or going to an in-person support group or getting connected with a loss organization or a grief organization. And then personal support. How are you supporting yourself? How is your self care? Are you allowing other people in? People can only help you to the extent that you allow them. And so letting somebody do what they need to do and letting go is vital in actually having support.

My friend, Crystal Gurney, she is a wonderful resource and a wonderful advocate in the birth community. She is a very strong, like, she's just very strongly believes that there is no such thing necessarily as a safe place. They're brave spaces, but you alone can determine if something is safe for you or not and whether you feel that safety. And she also says that no matter how supportive a room is, if you are not supporting yourself, if you are talking down to yourself, if you are judging your own emotions, if you are just counting your own grief, that is no longer a safe space because you are not being safe to yourself, if that makes sense. So that aspect of self care and allowing that grief to come without judgment, without censure without comparison, and accepting of yourself and accepting of your process is so important in your overall support system.

Cheri Gregory

Well, friends, we sure hope you've enjoyed listening to Episode 240 of Grit'N'Grace: The Podcast as much as we've enjoyed making it for you.

Amy Carroll

Listeners, we're so grateful that you join us each and every week.

Cheri Gregory

And we're so excited about our ongoing partnership with Compassion International, which made this second conversation with Rachel Lewis possible.

Amy Carroll

Child sponsorship is the most cost effective way to end child poverty. It not only addresses a child's immediate physical needs, it also builds self respect and self esteem.

Cheri Gregory

When you sponsor a Compassion child by visiting gritnegracethepodcast.com/compassion, you'll give a child the opportunity to develop their God-given potential and be released from the poverty that has trapped their families for generations.

Amy Carroll

And as a thank you gift, you'll receive a copy of our co-authored book, *Exhale*, for free.

Cheri Gregory

Check out our webpage at gritnegracethepodcast.com/episode240.

Amy Carroll

You'll find this week's transcript, a link to order Rachel's book, *Unexpected: Real Talk on Pregnancy Loss*, a link to Rachel's website, which has some great resources related to her book. And of course, the link to Compassion International.

Cheri Gregory

Speaking of *Exhale*, join us next week when we'll be talking with (clears throat) Amy Carroll and Cheri Gregory, co-authors of *Exhale: Lose Who You're Not, Love Who You Are, Live Your One Life Well*.

Amy Carroll

You heard it right – we're going to be interviewing ourselves next week. And you may wonder why – it's because we really believe that 2022 is going to be better than 2021. And *Exhale* could be part of that for you.

Cheri Gregory

For today, grow your grit,

Amy Carroll

embrace God's grace,

Cheri Gregory

and as God reveals the next step to live your one life well,

Amy Carroll

we'll be cheering you on! So –

Both

– take it!