

TRIBUNE VOICES

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Chrissy Teigen's posts about losing her baby are heartbreaking, generous



HEIDI STEVENS
Balancing Act

“Driving home from the hospital with no baby. How can this be real.”

It was a middle-of-the-night tweet from Chrissy Teigen, the model and author married to singer John Legend. The couple had just lost their son, Jack, after pregnancy complications.

“We are shocked and in the kind of deep pain you only hear about, the kind of pain we’ve never felt before,” Teigen wrote on Instagram around midnight Wednesday. “We were never able to stop the bleeding and give our baby the fluids he needed, despite bags and bags of blood transfusions. It just wasn’t enough.”

Teigen had been posting updates on Twitter and Instagram throughout the

hospitalization — inviting, as she does, a fickle, sometimes adoring, always unpredictable public into the private parts of her family’s life in a way that I’ve always found both endearing and brave.

And then the very worst happened, and she posted that too — inviting that same public to draw on its empathy reserves for this family we don’t really know, during the darkest moment of their lives.

Their candor may be a tremendous help to others who’ve suffered, or will suffer, a similar loss.

“Pregnancy and infancy loss is something that continues not to be seen, and we need to see it,” said Joey Miller, a licensed clinical social worker who specializes in loss and trauma. “We need to pay attention. We need to validate women and their partners, many of whom are continuing to suffer in silence. While this is a deeply personal loss, collectively we need to be more aware, deepen our sensitivity and increase our

awareness about something that happens, unfortunately, with great regularity.”

Up to 20% of known pregnancies end in miscarriage, Miller said, and 1 in 100 pregnancies end in stillbirth, which is defined as a loss after 20 weeks of gestation.

Yet the women and couples she counsels who’ve suffered this type of loss often feel uniquely alone, in both the experience and the aftermath. Their grief feels minimized and misunderstood.

“Many people erroneously believe there couldn’t have been enough time to form an attachment,” Miller said. “That could not be farther from the truth. Many women form an attachment from the moment the pregnancy is confirmed. The depth of grief has nothing to do with the length of the established relationship.”

In addition, the women or couples are left grieving the plans and hopes for the child and the intact family that will never materialize.

And they don’t have a lifetime of memories to draw on for comfort.

“If a grandparent or adult parent dies, we have all of these birthdays, anniversaries and holidays to recall,” Miller said. “For many women, having a few ultrasound pictures is very different from a collection of memories of many years spent together.

“It upsets the natural order,” she said. “Pregnancies and babies are supposed to be associated with new life and beginnings, not final endings.”

And it often leaves the partner who wasn’t carrying the pregnancy completely adrift.

“Many partners don’t even make it on the map,” Miller said. “There are no social norms that guide parents in these situations, leaving partners feeling completely helpless while simultaneously grieving the loss of the attachment themselves.”

Many grieving couples, Miller said, continue to feel misunderstood years after

the loss.

“Eighty percent of women will go on to conceive again,” Miller said. “And sometimes when there is another pregnancy, society can misunderstand, thinking, ‘They finally got what they wanted! Now their family is complete!’ But someone is always missing.”

Maybe seeing a famous couple publicly experience and express some of those gutwrenching emotions and complexities will help. In 2015, I wrote about Lynn and Craig Persin, a Chicago couple whose baby girl died inside Lynn when she was 8½ months pregnant.

“We felt like we were the first people in the universe to go through it,” Lynn told me at the time.

She wrote about the loss on her personal blog, and the traffic crashed her site. Ten thousand people read her post in a single day. She heard from strangers around the country.

I still hear from readers about that column. They hunger for community, and they hunger for resources,

and they hunger to feel understood.

Miller has a book coming out Oct. 13 titled “Rebirth: The Journey of Pregnancy After a Loss,” which weaves together personal stories and therapeutic guidance. “The Myth of the Perfect Pregnancy: A History of Miscarriage in America,” by Lara Freidenfelds, is an excellent book. The Star Legacy Foundation (starlegacyfoundation.org) is a nonprofit devoted to stillbirth and pregnancy loss research and education. Ariel Levy’s memoir, “The Rules Do Not Apply,” is a beautiful examination of life before, during and after a pregnancy loss.

“Grief,” Levy writes, “is a world you walk through skinned, unshelled.”

But you don’t have to do it alone. And in reminding us of that, Teigen’s posts are as generous as they are heartbreaking.

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balancing act

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Talking about stillbirth, a loss rarely discussed

It's a leap of faith to open your life up to strangers.

Faith in the strangers, that they'll receive you with grace and goodwill. Faith in yourself, that you won't crumble beneath the weight of their attention.

Lynn Persin took the leap, choosing to start a blog in 2011 to chronicle the progress and perils of raising her son, Aleck, who was born that year with arthrogryposis, a rare congenital disorder that causes multiple joint contractures and weakens muscles.

Doctors told Persin and her husband, Craig, that Aleck would never walk or have full use of his arms.

Aleck turns 4 in October, and he's walking quite beautifully, but his life is complicated by machines and therapists and difficulty with such day-to-day tasks as eating. It always will be.

Persin, 38, began narrating her son's life online as a way to update family and friends on his various treatments and milestones. She continues the blog for less logistical reasons.

"It's become my therapy," she told me recently over coffee at a cafe near her Logan Square home.

And because it's therapeutic and because the readers — family and friends, with a few strangers mixed in — have shown grace and goodwill, she recently ventured into a darker place.

Lynn and Craig lost their baby girl in 2010. After an uncomplicated pregnancy, the baby died inside of Persin after 8½ months. Doctors were unable to explain the death, even after an autopsy, which is terribly common in the case of stillbirths; roughly two-thirds of all stillbirth deaths go unexplained, estimates the Star Legacy Foundation, a national nonprofit devoted to stillbirth research and education.

A stillbirth is defined as a baby who dies at 20 weeks of pregnancy or later. A pregnancy that's lost before 20 weeks is medically classified as a miscarriage. Experts estimate 1 in 160 pregnancies end in stillbirth each year in the United States.

"We felt like we were the first people in the universe to go through it," Persin said.

On July 9, for the first time since her loss, Persin wrote about the experience on her blog. She, Craig and Aleck had recently visited their baby girl's grave site. "It was a lovely summer day at the cemetery," she



ERIN HOOLEY/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Lynn Persin exchanges a kiss with son Aleck while husband Craig looks on. Aleck inspired her to start a blog, on which she recently opened up about a baby girl she lost in 2010.

wrote. "Just cloudy enough to echo our souls, just warm enough to wrap us in a hug."

Her site crashed from the traffic. Ten thousand people read the post in a single day, she said. She heard from her New Jersey elementary school classmates. She heard from friends of her parents. She heard from strangers.

Many wrote to express sympathy. Several wrote to share their own stories of loss, which brought Persin a sense of comfort.

"The whole 'You're not alone' feeling has been really important to my husband and me since we started down this insane journey," she told me. "Since we first lost the baby to then having our son and his neuromuscular disorder, we've been on this constant quest to feel less alone."

Grief is excruciatingly isolating. Grief in a maternity ward is especially so. From the security guard who kept adding smiley faces to the badges of people visiting Lynn and Craig, to the anesthesiologist who wished Persin a carefree congratulations during her rounds, the signs were stark and immediate that people weren't accustomed

to a tragedy like theirs.

"Every step of the way, you're made to feel that much more alone," Persin said. "It really puts you in this no man's land kind of a place."

People rarely talk about stillbirth. I spoke recently with a dad whose baby girl died unexpectedly at 40 weeks in utero. "I didn't even know what a stillborn was until it happened to us," he told me. "Everyone keeps telling you about AIDS, but no one ever talked about this."

Joey Miller, a licensed clinical social worker at Wellspring Health Associates in Chicago, specializes in perinatal loss. She counsels families who experience the death of a baby during pregnancy, during delivery or shortly after.

"It can be a very isolating and lonely path," Miller told me. "We talk about things like breast cancer and heart disease and stroke — as well we should. But we don't talk enough about when a baby dies. I will lobby until my last breath to raise awareness and increase education and sensitivity every way I can for these parents, because it's not about the length of gestation; it's

about the depth of attachment."

Miller says a baby's death is a "double loss."

"Sometimes parents find out they're pregnant, and they have that child's whole life planned, with all the hopes and dreams that go into it," she said. "When a grandparent — or even a parent — dies, it's a loss for the future, but you're comforted by the memories. When a baby dies, it's a loss of everything future — all your hopes and dreams — but also everything past. Maybe you have an ultrasound picture, but you don't have memories with this person, and that's very disorienting and dizzying for parents."

Often the friends and loved ones of a couple who've lost their baby don't know how best to comfort the grieving parents, adding to their feelings of isolation. The Star Legacy Foundation site offers advice on what not to say: "You can have more children." "God needed an angel." "It wasn't meant to be." "God doesn't give us more than we can handle." "You'll feel better once you get back to your normal life." That last one in particular.

"The grieving is not over, ever," Miller said. "We can go on to find happiness and joy in our lives, but that definitely takes work, and it's not about getting over it, which to many parents implies forgetting."

We'd all do well to remember that when approaching grieving parents, she said.

"The depth and duration of a parent's grief greatly outlasts the depth and duration of other people's sympathy," Miller said. "People will bring food, or people will bring flowers, but after a few weeks or months, they go back to their own lives. Parents don't get over this."

And people's needs change over time. If they weren't ready to talk at first, they may be ready later. If they wanted lots of company at first, they may be ready for privacy later. Just check in, Miller said. "You may or may not want to respond," she suggests saying. "But I want you to know I'm thinking about you."

Read the blog post

To read Lynn Persin's July 9 blog post about losing her baby, go to www.smartaleckpersin.com (type "goodbye all over again" in the search field).