

Trying for children and miscarriage in Ireland

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When things don't go to plan – How to support employees trying for children or experiencing miscarriage

It's important for employers to recognise that not everyone's path to parenthood goes smoothly. Arguably, those who have to deal with the pain, anger, stress and confusion that can come with the highs and lows of fertility treatment – from surrogacy and adoption to IVF and miscarriages – need as much support in the workplace, if not more, than their counterparts who have a smooth path.

There's currently no Irish law that covers fertility treatment and sadly it's not something that's openly talked about in most workplaces, but that doesn't mean there aren't lots of things you can do to support your employees.

Approximately 1 in 6 heterosexual couples in Ireland may experience infertility[1]. Aside from the financial drain, the potential mental health impact can unsurprisingly be astounding, with 90% of fertility patients reporting feelings of depression and 42% having felt suicidal. And yet, as an extremely personal subject, many employees suffer in silence while trying to do a good job at work.

While many employers now have an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) or mental health policies, which is a positive step in the right direction, employers can still do much more to help. Indeed, a survey conducted by LinkedIn and Censuswide, showed that the vast majority (91 per cent) of the 1,000 HR professionals polled said they would benefit from education and support to better understand employee fertility issues.



How employers can show support for those with fertility issues

While employees currently have no statutory right to take time off work to undergo IVF treatment, the following may help to show your employees your support:

- Reduce the stigma: as a company, talk about fertility issues and actively let employees know that you're there to support them.
- Treat fertility issues in the same way as any other medical issue and, where possible, give employees the flexibility they require around treatments.
- Have flexible working options in place and make sure employees know you're supportive of this, whatever the situation.
- If at all possible, offer financial support towards fertility treatment.
- Train managers on the main issues and empower them to be supportive.

Acas recommends that if your employee tells you they've reached the embryo transfer stage, from a legal perspective you must treat them as pregnant and they'll have the same rights as any pregnant person (including leave, pay, and protection from discrimination).



Miscarriages and work

According to Tommys.org, an estimated 1 in 4 pregnancies ends in a miscarriage[2]. This means that a potentially huge number of women are having to go into work having recently had a miscarriage and carry on as usual, with their partners having to do the same.

Again, while giving employees access to an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) or providing a mental health policy is a good first step, we can learn a lot by looking at the approach taken by other countries around the world. India, for instance, offers an entitlement of six weeks of paid maternity leave. As an employer, making moves towards this will demonstrate you are a family-friendly business who puts your employees mental and physical health first.



How to support employees who've been through a miscarriage

Women who have miscarriages are not entitled to their maternity rights. If employees need time off work following the loss of their baby, they must ask their employer for compassionate leave or ask to take annual leave or unpaid leave. The following ideas may help with supporting your employees further:

- Create an environment of openness: getting senior managers to talk openly about their own mental health issues will make openness and over-coming personal challenges a sign of strength and highlight that employees are not alone in facing these types of challenges.
- Offer extended compassionate leave: giving employees the option to take extended periods of leave and have time to focus on themselves and their recovery is essential. Adjusting your maternity policy to offer 4-6 weeks leave after experiencing miscarriage will be a huge step and, in turn will create the culture of support and empathy that employers should embrace.
- Educate managers on how to deal with major personal life events: empowering managers to be as supportive as possible, giving them autonomy to offer a variety of options for support and periods of paid leave will help. In terms of miscarriage, simply understanding that miscarriage can be a lengthy process and that mental health implications can persist for months, if not years will go a long way to help.
- Offer mental health support and publicise its availability: getting the support you need after experiencing miscarriage is essential. Offering easy access to mental health support will make a huge difference and hopefully shorten the length of time it takes for individuals to feel themselves again.

Mental Health problems at work cost the Irish economy 8.2 billion euros each year. By adopting some of the policies above and prioritising your employees mental and physical well-being you will not only increase your profitability but also improve your employer brand and become an employer of choice for prospective employees.

Support

Create a calendar of fertility awareness dates to show your support. This will enable you to provide information about the subjects and communicate this to employees while also letting them know about any internal policies or support available to them, e.g. flexible working, Employee Assistance Programmes and so on. Put up posters, create screensavers, talk about it in team meetings. If you can, consider getting an expert on the subject to come and talk to your workforce.

Exact dates for your calendar may change each year, but recent examples include:

- World Prematurity Day is observed on 17 November each year to raise awareness of preterm birth and the concerns of preterm babies and their families worldwide.
- Baby Loss Awareness Week is held annually in October
- World Adoption Day is held in November to give the adoption community a voice and share stories and experiences <https://www.worldadoptionday.org/>





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