# **Thank you, NHS England, for offering baby-loss leave. This kindness should be every employee’s right**

The news that NHS England [will offer paid leave](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/mar/13/nhs-england-trusts-advised-to-offer-women-two-weeks-miscarriage-leave#:~:text=NHS%20England%20announced%20on%20Wednesday,recover%20from%20the%20distress%20involved.) to staff who have a miscarriage in the first 24 weeks of pregnancy, as part of a wider pregnancy and baby loss policy, made me gasp. It is almost startling in both its compassion and the light it shines on the enormous burden that parents thus far have had to carry alone. The birth parent can take 10 days, a partner five. Staff who miscarry after six months can take [paid maternity leave](https://www.england.nhs.uk/2024/03/paid-leave-for-nhs-staff-experiencing-pregnancy-loss/). This is a significant amount of time for something that, up until now, people have had to suffer alone.

Loss is all around us, often suffered in silence. A friend had a miscarriage last weekend. Another friend recently lost her much longed for twins. Another remembers her losses by lighting a candle and posting a photo of it online, as part of the [Wave of Light](https://babyloss-awareness.org/wave-of-light/) during baby loss awareness week in October: I had no idea she had gone through that until social media gave her the opportunity to grieve. These are just three that I know about off the top of my head. I know that, even walking down the street, I am likely to be passing people going through the mixed feelings of pain, grief and, for some, perhaps, relief, that come with a miscarriage. [One in four](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/mar/13/nhs-england-trusts-advised-to-offer-women-two-weeks-miscarriage-leave#:~:text=One%20in%20four%20pregnancies%20end,its%20new%20approach%20to%20miscarriage.) pregnancies end in baby loss. That is an awful lot of pain being swallowed down.

My own experience was not one of baby loss, per se, but it drove for me the importance of having time to recover. In 2019, after nearly four years of trying naturally, my husband and I had two cycles of IVF that failed because my eggs didn’t mature enough to fertilise. My employer was kind enough to let me take the odd afternoon to go to appointments without question; I booked our dates for egg collection off as holiday. Some businesses now offer [IVF leave](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/nov/06/fertility-treatment-work-employers), but one thing at a time.

We were given a diagnosis of “unexplained infertility”, and were eventuallytold that further IVF was not recommended for us. We looked into adoption, but the prospect of facing that entirely different challenge was beyond us by that point. That Christmas, we adopted our dog, Sybil, giving her one of the Terry Pratchett character names we had hoped we might give our child.

There is an excellent term, “[disenfranchised grief](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disenfranchised_grief)”, coined by Kenneth Doka, to refer to grief that is not recognised by society. And mine was staggering – a whirlwind of chaotic pain that I transmuted into makeovers, shopping and panic. Having endured the best part of four years of grinding through my monthly periods in miserable silence, I eventually got that recognition, that kindness, by tweeting after our second cycle failed: “I’ve just found out that our second round of IVF hasn’t worked, for reasons that mean that I will probably never be able to have a baby. If you have time to send good thoughts, I would really appreciate it. I never knew I could feel so ill or so sad.”

Having people see that pain and recognise it was so helpful. It didn’t take it away, but it felt as though someone was helping to carry it – thousands of people, as it turned out. And that was pain before I had even got to the starting point of pregnancy: for people to have to go through that further loss, one that is physical, mental and spiritual, and then to immediately return to work as though nothing had happened, is utterly inhumane.

 Women have been in the workplace for long enough now for miscarriage leave to be factored into a company’s benefits, and some larger companies, such as John Lewis and Santander, already do that. According to a [2022 report](https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/reports/pregnancy-baby-loss-report/), just over a third of employers have a policy concerning pregnancy loss – but only 21% offer paid leave for pregnancy loss before 24 weeks for the mother. The fact that NHS England’s policy is newsworthy speaks volumes. People may be able to take sick leave or compassionate leave at the discretion of their employer, yet this is not a given, and asking can feel like another insurmountable obstacle at a time when simply getting out of bed can be a challenge.

Grief shows up for each of us in so many ways. I might also point out that these policies benefit employers: after a hospital trust in Birmingham ran a trial of this new policy, it found that staff were [twice as likely to continue working there](https://www.healthbusinessuk.net/news/13032024/nhs-provide-paid-leave-staff-experiencing-pregnancy-loss). Giving people time to grieve, mourn and physically recover can often mean staving off further problems down the line, rather than an individual bottling them up and then exploding when it simply becomes too much.

This was my experience. Again, I hadn’t physically lost a child, but simply losing the tangibility of the idea I had loved, treasured and hoped for for so long was significant enough. I had three weeks off after that second cycle failed, and eventually I left my job, reasoning I no longer needed the maternity leave and could explore new avenues. I wasn’t really reasoning – I had gone mad with grief, and my future suddenly veered off into a new timeline. It’s why I collected stories from people with and without children to create a book that acted as a kind of support group for anyone going through loss.

This recognition from work, where we spend most of our time, is so validating, kind and helpful. And it’s long overdue.