



Stillbirth Happens – let's talk

E01: Stillbirth happens, so let's talk about it

Released June 8th, 2023

Note: This transcript may contain errors. If you wish to re-use all, or part of, a transcript, please contact pop.health@cw.bc.ca for permission. Please check the corresponding audio before quoting in print. © BC Women's Hospital + Health Centre, 2023

ERIN: Birth is a profound experience and sometimes whether or not we want to think about it, part of that experience includes stillbirth. Hi, I'm Erin.

JAIME: Hi, I'm Jaime. We're both moms who have experienced stillbirth. Our stories are not the same as each other's, not the same as yours. But if you're listening to this podcast, we are guessing it's because your life has been affected by stillbirth.

ERIN: We're here to witness, to sit with you while you process, to hopefully offer some better perspectives that might help to talk about something that nobody wants to talk about.

JAIME: The silence around stillbirth is deafening. The reasons for the reluctance to talk about stillbirth run deep, from our misplaced cultural fear of death to the well-intentioned desire to fuel confidence in pregnant women.

ERIN: But when stillbirth happens, and it does, the silence doesn't help. It can make you feel alone.

JAIME: In this episode, we'll hear from a bereaved mom and a clinician who feel that because the maternity journey includes death, the possibility of stillbirth should be talked about, right up front.

ERIN: Jennifer Kuznetsov is many things, including mama, to two babies, Andrey, who died unexpectedly at 29 weeks gestation, and her living daughter, Luna, who is now 10 months old.

ERIN: Welcome Jennifer, and thank you for joining us.

JENNIFER: Hi. It's nice to be here, to chat and to be a part of the conversation.

ERIN: Okay Jennifer, so even before we dive into it, just to briefly let you know, my middle daughter was born still in 2010.

JAIME: I'll share a little bit about myself. I have two sons that were stillborn three years apart.

JAIME: I have a living daughter. She's, uh, well she is almost 18. She was my first child and then my son, James, was stillborn in March of 2010, and my son Zachary in June of 2013.

JENNIFER: It's so nice to meet you both and meeting bereaved parents is, is a really special thing I think. I can already feel tears coming, but we'll welcome them.

ERIN: Perfect.

JAIME: We are so sorry for the loss of Andrey. What went through your mind when you first learned at 29 weeks that your baby no longer had a heartbeat?

JENNIFER: Oh, so many things went through my mind. I think the first thing was shock and disbelief. I think there were more feelings to be had than, than thoughts that were coming through. There were waves of emotion all at once. Everything from sadness, disbelief was one of them again, and just heartbreak.

ERIN: And had you at any way been prepared for anything like this to happen, Jennifer?

JENNIFER: No. Throughout this pregnancy, and it was my first pregnancy, I was within all the normal "measures". Baby looked healthy at every appointment. They were anterior placenta, so it was normal not to always feel movement, but I did not have the education to watch for kicks or what pointers to look out for if there was say something to worry over.

JAIME: In those moments, you wish that you had known and that it had been talked about prior.

JENNIFER: I wish there was a conversation that this is a reality, this can happen. It is uncomfortable to talk about death. And I think when you're growing life, that's the last thing that you wanna talk about.

ERIN: Absolutely.

JENNIFER: But I think the ultimate shock of it came from not knowing this can happen and it happens more often than people actually talk about.

ERIN: Right. And did you have like a doctor or a doula, or did you do birthing classes and none of them mentioned the possibility of stillbirth at all?

JENNIFER: Great question. I was being followed by a midwife and in their program, birthing classes don't start until the third trimester, and I was just entering that third trimester, so it was a weird time. So I would say I, you don't know what you don't know,

ERIN: Right

JENNIFER: And in my appointments it was listening to the heartbeat with the Doppler and measuring my belly. In terms of education, it was pretty minimal, I would say looking back now.

JAIME: And so what was it like for you when you decided to try and become pregnant again?

JENNIFER: Scary! It's scary to think about getting pregnant again. And I would say there was, I think a pressure to, to get pregnant after a loss because, in a way, I wanted to feel connected to Andrey, and I only knew him in pregnancy, so I wanted to feel pregnant. So that I could feel him, but feel

like I had a connection to him. So in a way that there was a bit of desperation to get pregnant quickly, and anxiety and pressure that I put on myself because it wasn't happening as fast as I wanted it to. But I knew I, I wanted to have a baby and yeah, it, it was a journey in and of itself trying to get pregnant after loss and feeling scared. I, I would say cautious optimism was at the forefront.

ERIN: Yeah. And how long did it take you to get pregnant after Andrey?

JENNIFER: About two years or so. And we experienced two losses. After Andrey, so Luna, our living daughter, was our fourth pregnancy.

ERIN: Fourth

JENNIFER: Yeah.

ERIN: So you've had three losses.

JENNIFER: Correct.

ERIN: which is profound.

JENNIFER: Yeah.

JAIME: And so how did Andrey's stillbirth affect the way you experienced your pregnancy with Luna?

JENNIFER: I think I white knuckled myself through appointments. Desperately wanting to hear a heartbeat and preparing myself at each weekly appointment to hear that there was no heartbeat, because I wanted to protect myself, so I was scared to get excited. I was, I didn't wanna fall hard, so I was trying to almost distance myself. I, I didn't wanna buy anything for the nursery, didn't wanna prepare because I was scared to return everything I was, I was scared to fall in love with this baby and feel hopeful that they would arrive safely. So I was, I was nervous the entire time that every appointment, hearing their progress and, having more touchpoints with doctors and specialists did help me feel a smidge of hope. Um, so I would leave those appointments hopeful and excited, and then leading up kind of the anxiety would take over and anxious to hear their heartbeat again.

JAIME: I can completely relate to so much of what, what you said, wanting to feel that connection, but then trying to protect yourself from feeling that connection. Very much so. And yeah, my pregnancy after loss, I, I don't think I bought very many things at all because, exactly I, I didn't want to have to go through that piece of it again. And then the guilt that comes with that as well, so, it, yeah.

ERIN: I also did not bond with my third when I was pregnant. I wouldn't allow myself to go there, and sometimes I'm like, geez, you missed out on that bonding time. But I could not physically do it just because of all the unknowns and that's okay, but the whole grieving process all over again while you're carrying again, is horrific. Really. It's almost like going through it all over again.

JENNIFER: Yeah, quite traumatic and scary all at the same time.

ERIN: Yeah.

JAIME: We wanted to hear more about this from someone with more clinical experience. So we reached out to a retired OB/GYN, who worked closely with bereaved parents for more than 30 years. We asked her why there's still so much silence around it in maternity clinics and hospitals. Let's listen.

KIRSTEN: My name is Kirsten Duckitt. I'm now a retired obstetrician and I'm just working part-time doing some gynecology. But for over 30 years I was practicing obstetrics, both in the UK and in Canada. And during that time I saw many, many stillbirths. I think there's still a lot of silence around the topic of stillbirth.

There's a huge number of reasons. I think as a society, we are not very good at talking about death at any time in life, but particularly in pregnancy, which is supposed to be a natural joyous process. The last thing you think about is the risk of either anything going wrong and particularly not either the baby or the mom dying during the whole process.

I think as healthcare professionals we commonly, we still worry that we are going to say the wrong thing and upset people even more at a very upsetting time in their life. We want to be able to explain what's happened, but in an awful lot of times we can't and we especially can't when people first come in and we are diagnosing their stillbirth and it's happening.

We're often the people that they ask these things first and you feel terribly inadequate if you can't tell them the most useful things straightaway. And I just think pregnancy is such a, especially late pregnancy, is such an obvious condition, and these families are going home.

Still with a bit of a bump. You know, people are gonna be asking them how the pregnancy is going. Everything is geared around the delivery, you know, before delivery, after delivery. And all of a sudden, you know, you've got nothing to show for it. And it's just a really upsetting, difficult time for everyone.

The care of women who come in with stillbirth is, is still very different depending on which hospital you are at, but I think things have improved a lot over time. I certainly think we could perhaps do better with a more formal follow up. And I know the S.O.G.C. which is the Society of Gynecologists and Obstetricians in Canada, have guidelines about making sure the investigations are done after a stillbirth to find out as many answers as possible. But I certainly think there could be a better standardization of care around this so that it wouldn't matter which hospital you're being looked after, you get the same excellent care as best that can be provided. Obviously, research needs to continue into causes and prevention of stillbirth. We only get the answers for what happens or what has happened in about 50% of cases. There's also a need for perhaps, standardization of care of what happens in future pregnancies. And again, different communities offer different levels of counseling and support and, ah, these kind of services are, are just often very fragmented.

And it behooves all of us looking after pregnant women to know what's available in our local area so that they can be informed about this rather than having no supports at all when, when they're discharged after the medical part of the whole process. I think there's great

value in bringing the conversation surrounding stillbirth more into the open, and I think there's a huge spectrum of, of different feelings and, like with a lot of things, you want to know you're not alone and you can always learn things from other people and you know, the more it's talked about, the less shame there is about it. I think a lot of time shame is perhaps the emotion that's out there.

If you are the mum, you tend to think, oh, you know, what did I do wrong to cause this? And if you're the healthcare professional looking after the mum, you think I must have done something wrong or maybe I did something wrong. So, I think the more this is talked about, the more people are aware that it can happen. And really, most of the time, it's not anyone's fault and preventions, if possible, would go a long way to helping families in this situation.

ERIN: So Jennifer, back to you: as a mom who went through a stillbirth. Why do you think we need to talk more about it? What is the benefit of doing that?

JENNIFER: I think had I known there was a possibility for our growing baby to die, might have helped prepare me. And I'm not saying that anyone can prepare for death, and that's not, that's not what I'm trying to say here, but rather maybe soften the blow. I, I was angry

ERIN: Hmm

JENNIFER: that I didn't know this could happen. I wanted someone to blame and it feels so unfair that this can happen. But I think knowing and, and having that education piece, or conversation and resources, people to connect with, is helpful to navigate what comes after. Because a lot of the time you're just drowning and so much. That knowing what you could do, where to go, who to talk to, would help feel like you're not alone in it.

ERIN: Yeah.

JAIME: That's exactly it. As I mentioned, my first experience with stillbirth was in 2010 and my second in 2013 and less than a month after my son Zach's stillbirth I attended a conference and that's where Erin and I first met. And walking into that room and being in that room with other parents that had experienced stillbirth, for the first time in three and a half years, I felt normal.

ERIN: Yeah. And how a little bit of research or a little bit of time going into having people speak to us about the chances of having a stillbirth, because I had never known anyone to have had a stillbirth until after I had had mine. And Jennifer, I'm not sure how it was with you. Did you have time to process from the time that you found out that Andrey didn't have a heartbeat to when you gave birth?

JENNIFER: It's funny how you remember all the details so vividly.

ERIN: Mm-hmm.

JENNIFER: And, the weekend, I wasn't feeling a lot of movement, so I went to the walk-in that day and they couldn't find a heartbeat, but I wasn't worried at that time because you know, baby is anterior placenta and so there's a bit of cushioning, from what I was told. So it was in the hospital, in the emergency or urgent care, where they confirmed they couldn't find the heartbeat. There

was no heartbeat, and they gave me the option to go home or stay. So, we chose to stay. And then that night I was started on Pitocin and then following day, I delivered Andrey. So in terms of processing from the time of the news to the delivery, it was there, but I mean, it, it takes a long time to process that sort of news.

ERIN: Absolutely.

JENNIFER: I don't think I wanted to believe it in the moment. So yeah, it took, it took a while, but there was still a lot of processing. Between and after. I'm really grateful for our social worker. She was very gentle with giving us options and presenting to us, my husband and I, and I'm so grateful for my husband to almost help field a lot of the questions that were coming to us. But yeah, I didn't feel prepared, but I think they, the nurses, the care team, everyone at the hospital. What I can remember is that they took such good and loving care for us to feel warm and safe and unhurried and listened to because it was such a devastating event. So I'm really grateful that they let us take our time. We stayed two nights. And when we felt we were ready to leave, uh, the hospital to give us the, the little take home box and how we wanted to honour his life, you know, cremation or gravestone, all these things you don't think about or think, think you have to make a decision for. Uh, so we took our time and I'm, I'm grateful that they took care of us and allowed us to take that time.

ERIN: That's amazing.

JAIME: That's really great.

JENNIFER: Yeah.

JAIME: I'm gonna take us back just a little bit, after Andrey, you had three more pregnancies. The first two pregnancies ended in miscarriage, and the third you were pregnant with Luna. You knew the possibility of stillbirth. You were aware. How did that change things for you, having it all out in the open?

JENNIFER: It sat at the forefront of my thoughts in a way, I would say it almost felt like a shield to give me a layer of protection. Does that make sense?

ERIN: Yes. A shield. Yes, absolutely. I love that analogy. Yep. Yeah. Protect yourself.

JENNIFER: Yeah.

ERIN: Yeah. So you went in and saw specialists and your doctors more or your midwife more. Did you find that any of those extras, if you were given them, did it bring you a little bit more reassurance or did it help with the nerves of getting through?

JENNIFER: Yeah, to my knowledge, once you have a stillbirth, you are considered high risk in a next pregnancy. We did opt for the autopsy and found that I had an autoimmune disorder I didn't know I had, which is the cause of Andrey's death. So with that coupled with the stillbirth, I was high risk and needed extra medication, extra monitoring, and I was being followed by an OB this time around, um, I personally found extra monitoring extra visits to the hospital, extra opportunities times to hear baby's heartbeat with the Doppler, see them on the ultrasound scans. I loved, and

I'm so grateful that I had the attention given to me and this baby, Luna, so that we could ensure that she arrived safely. So, at times it felt like anxiety inducing going to another appointment, but I'm ultimately so grateful that I had a team who all were there with me to make sure that we had a healthy baby.

ERIN: I wish more people had a care team like that around all of us. It makes such a difference.

JENNIFER: Yeah, totally.

JAIME: Jen, I'm wondering how the stillbirth impacts you now as a mom in terms of how you parent Luna.

JENNIFER: Ooh, that's a great question. I have never thought about that. When I think about stillbirth, I think about death, but also the gravity of love that comes with death and how I, how I think it will infuse or show up in how I parent Luna is to have those conversations, to show her his memorial site where we laid his, uh, a rock at the Dry Creek, the the Dry Creek here in Vancouver, and have that be a conversation and know that he is and was a part of our story, kind of that big brother. So that will come with time when she can kind of understand us 'cuz she's 10 months now.

ERIN: So, I don't know if I've told you this, but I actually live in Manitoba now. So when you're talking about this Dry Creek, I have no idea what you're talking about. I wanna know more, please.

JENNIFER: Yeah. I found out about it from another bereaved parent. So, the day after we were discharged, I went to a support group, literally the day after, and I connected with with two other families. And there's a cemetery in Vancouver and they have this beautiful dry creek. I think it's a stunning space. And they created this dry creek for all the stillborn babies. Each rock is to represent a baby. And you see little baby rocks with names and it feels almost magical because and less lonely, that there are other little babies that your baby is with. And I think that's really heartwarming, knowing I'm thinking about them in another life, whatever that looks like. And they're not alone. I think that was really special.

JAIME: I have those same thoughts. I often think even in a conversation like we're having right now, that, uh, my boys are having a play date right now too, 'cuz we're connected they're, they're connected. And I don't know what that means, but I, that is something for me that I, I can definitely relate to what, what you said there. Just going back to a couple of things that you said about parenting Luna, and you know, over time that, that that will happen. And for me, my, my living daughter is my, my first born. And so she lived through both of our stillbirth experiences as well, and, and her brothers are very much a part of who she is. And she was four and seven when, when they were born. And so it's definitely been part of our journey all the way through, through parenting her. And I know at first I think I was, I was very much hands-on and I would just go and I would watch her sleep.

JENNIFER: Yes!

JAIME: I would constantly just be in her room and watching her sleep, and that was huge and it slowly over time, I, I was able to, to reduce that. But yeah, that was very much a part of the start for me.

JENNIFER: Oh, I remember that so clearly. Just eyes glued to the monitor or checking their back, uh, when, when she was sleeping. Just extra monitoring, extra watchfulness.

ERIN: Yeah. Yeah. Now with my oldest, I would try to put her down, especially when anybody told me to. And then we had Ryann, and then 13 months later we had their brother Quinn. I didn't put that kid down, and then it backfired, you know, when I was like, why can't my kid just go to sleep? But. It's cuz he would just want it to be held onto all the time. But you know, one of the neat things that I'm super proud of, the kids talk about their families at school and you know, when Luna gets to school age, they'll ask, how many siblings do you have? Or, tell me about your family. And without even being prompted, my kids would always draw Ryann in a picture.

JENNIFER: I love that. I love that so much. And I think that having this conversation and, and just some of the things that you said make me think of what people ask, like, how many do you have? Is this your first? And, and I used to tiptoe, I used to try to protect people's feelings, but after losing Andrey, I think what changed for me is, I started to insert him wherever I had the opportunity to bring him to the conversation. So in that way, I could honor him by talking about him, by talking about pregnancy and Infancy Loss Day, talking about Mother's Day, and not having my son, and still feeling like a mom and letting people know this is uncomfortable, but it's also so important. To see and recognize that moms don't all necessarily have living children to be mom.

ERIN: Yet they're still moms.

JENNIFER: Absolutely.

ERIN: Yeah, what a proud feeling.

JENNIFER: Yeah.

ERIN: You know, it's sad, but it's, I'm still proud of my daughter, Ryann.

JENNIFER: Yes.

ERIN: I'm proud of where she's taken me. I'm proud that, heck, 10 years ago, 13 years ago, I did not think that this would ever happen, and I am so proud that our babies brought us together.

JENNIFER: Same. Really grateful, you know, where Andrey's passing pushed me to grow as a person and in my own mental health. And taking care of myself in that way. And, grieving a loss like this for the very first time, changed me. And I think pregnancy, birth, being a parent changes you. His life, as short as it was, changed me and I'm, I'm so grateful.

JAIME: I feel the same way. I, I feel like my boys have given me a voice, I'm not sure, uh, I knew I had before and they, they pushed that out and they gave me courage and so this is a way that we can honour our kids. Yeah. And people need to know about stillbirth. Jennifer, to wrap up as a final piece of the conversation, we'd like to ask you what words you would like to share with others so they don't feel so alone.

JENNIFER: It's earth shattering, heartbreaking, devastating. It turned our whole world upside down, and I think losing your baby is one of the hardest thing that anyone can go through. And it

sucked. It absolutely sucks that it happened. But what I hope is that when it comes to stillbirths, there are other bereaved parents around who wanna talk about their babies. And I think it's okay to talk about your baby. It's okay to grieve in whatever way that works for you. It's beautiful to honour them and their life, and whatever works for you and your family, and when it comes to stillbirth, I feel like such an important topic to have when pregnant, when considering pregnancy, and I just hope that we can share more of our stories with each other and their outlets there because ultimately I think bereaved parents just wanna talk about their babies it's another way to honor them and celebrate them, and whoever is going through stillbirths, I hope they don't feel alone.

JAIME: Any final words, Jennifer, about the knowledge of of stillbirth?

JENNIFER: So much of stillbirth, there is grief and sadness, heaviness, so much darkness and it takes time to feel hopeful. It takes time to let that grief transform and change. It doesn't leave just because they're no longer here. Your grief. I found that I, I had to always be angry and sad to stay in that grief, but over time it took me a while to understand that I can feel love and hopeful and excited 'cuz the grief changed. It's two sides of the same coin, like grief and love. The reason why we are so devastated is because we love so hard. We love so much. And I think a quote that really stuck with me is grief is "love's unwillingness to let go". And that stuck with me and made me feel that I, I have the capacity to love and feel love for another pregnancy, for another child for, for this family, and when it comes to stillbirth, there's a lot of sadness, but there can also be a lot of good things that come from it too. Um, it doesn't always have to feel dark and upsetting, but hopefully people who navigate through stillbirth loss and grief journey to transform in a way that uplifts them.

JAIME: Oh my goodness.

ERIN: So good.

JENNIFER: Thank you. It's, it's an honour and I love that this is happening. The conversations are happening, and in any way we can honour our babies, I love that.

JAIME: Thank you so much for joining us to listen to Jennifer and Kirsten. Please join us whenever you can and share this podcast with anyone who needs it. Take good care of yourself and talk to you soon.