

## MARRIAGE & GRIEF

The first thing we do when our child dies is to turn to our spouse. We turn to each other in mutual pain and devastation. We hold each other tightly through the early days of the funeral and for the first few weeks. We hold each other up, lest, singly, we fall. We tell each other: "Lean on me, I'll help you. This will bring us closer together. Together we will survive this." Those around us tell us the same thing. And we believe it.

Then in the weeks and months that follow our child's death, our support of each other begins to falter. She says: "He doesn't understand why I cry all the time." He says: "I don't want to come home from work, all I see is tears and sadness." She says: "He didn't love our child as I do because he doesn't grieve as much as I do." He says: "I hurt terribly too, but I don't see any reason to show my feelings all the time." She says that he doesn't care. He says that she is weak. And on and on it goes, blaming, accusing and hurting each other. Each one goes his or her own way, pulling farther and farther apart, neither one understanding why the other can't be more supportive. Eventually, the marriage begins to weaken, and if it isn't completely broken, irreparable damage can be done.

Of course this doesn't happen in every bereaved marriage, but it happens in many. The problem comes from a lack of knowledge of the traditional differences in male and female personalities, assumptions about how your spouse is reacting to your child's death, and unrealistic expectations of the other.

As an individual, how you cope with your child's death will be very much like how you have coped with other problems in your life. If you have coped by heading right into the problem, facing it and working through it, it is likely you will do the same in your grief. If, on the other hand, you avoided problems, you will probably do the same thing with your grief. This is true of your marriage also. If you had a good communicative, supportive marriage before your child died, it is likely, with some precautions taken, that you will continue this communication and support in your marriage after our child dies. The reverse is also true. If your relationship was a tenuous one before your child's death it is likely to be destroyed under the strain of parental grief.

But it doesn't have to be. Just as your child's death can bring strength and growth to you, it can bring strength and growth to your marriage. Knowledge of the pitfalls and a willingness to face and work through them can result in a deeply binding and rewarding marriage.

In spite of today's awareness of the dangers of boxing men and women into specific roles, we are still living in an age where the traditional way of looking at males and females is still very strong. Even though many of us are trying to see ourselves and others as individuals rather than the stereotypes of the past, none-the-less, we bring our past conditioning into our lives today. It is this past conditioning that causes us to grieve differently from our spouse.

Very early in life men are taught to control their emotions, which means, suppress them. They are told to "be strong", "don't cry" and throughout their lives this is constantly reinforced. When they are married, in addition to the dictum of tight self-control they are expected to assume the impossible roles of "provider", "problem solver", and "protector" for the family.

Because father sees himself as the provider he usually goes back to work sooner than his wife. Because he believes he must suppress his emotions, he thinks getting back to work quickly is most helpful, because it occupies his times and keeps him from thinking too much. Typical of most bereaved fathers he usually has difficulty concentrating and has less energy, but because of both the internalized directive to be strong and to provide, he is forced into even more strain. Also, he must return to a household each day where his wife may be actively grieving. This is difficult for fathers. He either becomes impatient with her tears and sadness, or he withdraws when he is there. Or, he goes home less and less.

In his role of protector, the father expects to protect his family from all harm, but in his unconscious mind he has failed. First he could not prevent his child's death, and now he can't protect his family from the terrible pain of their grief. This guilt adds additional stress to his already extreme efforts at controlling (suppressing) his grief. As the the problem solver he has failed again. He cannot "fix" a dead child, nor can he "fix" a devastated wife and family. He feels helpless and frustrated and guilty.

Because men are expected to be self-sufficient it is hard for them to share thoughts and feelings with another person, even a close friend, and so they must hold inside of themselves the emotions they feel. Many times their wives see this as not caring.

Women, on the other hand, are traditionally given more permission to be emotional. Society allows a woman to cry and express emotion to some extent, but if a man does this he is called a “sissy” or other derogatory names. She is allowed, and sometimes even expected, to turn to someone for help. Men are seen as weak if they do. Wives feel that they can turn to their husbands for help. Husbands feel they cannot turn to anyone.

Women are conditioned differently. While she may be allowed to openly express her emotions, she too has been boxed into certain roles. She is expected to be the primary caregiver. Fortunately this is changing somewhat today with fathers taking a more active role in caring for his children, but still the old expectations are with many of us. If she has provided the daily care of the child, not only is that role lost to her at the child’s death, but she feels that she has failed to take care of the child as she should have.

Women have been called the “weaker sex” for many generations. Many women have internalized this and truly believe they are weak because they don’t react with the same stoicism that their husbands do. Women see themselves as incapable of surviving their grief without help. Thus, she may believe her “stronger” husband should be the one to help her.

Or the wife may see herself as the heart of the family and in this role she feels she must “hold up” her husband and surviving children. At a time when she too, cannot concentrate and has much less energy than she had before her child died, she may feel overwhelmed and over burdened by family responsibilities. She may feel that she is a failure as a mother.

I have described differences in husbands and wives in the traditional sense, but we must remember that these are stereotypes brought about by many generations of “should be’s” and “ought to’s.” They are not scientific truths. There will be some of us who were not conditioned this way or are different from what I described. It is also possible that the roles in your family are reversed. The wife may be stoic and the father may be emotional. The real point is that two people in a marriage relationship are different and they come to their grief from different social conditioning, expectations and experiences.

As a counselor once pointed out to me, the word “assume” makes an “ASS out of U and ME”. It certainly does. How many times do we assume something about another that we find out at a later time is not true at all, or maybe it is the opposite of what we thought? When we assume

something about another, especially a grieving spouse, we operate from a false premise. Unfortunately in our grief we do this all too often. We think we know our spouse, how he or she thinks or feels, his or her likes and dislikes, but do we really? Do you really know that when he puts in extra hours at work is it because he doesn’t want to be home, or is it because he is working less efficiently and therefore must put in more time to accomplish what he could formerly accomplish. Do you know that when she doesn’t want to have intercourse is it because she doesn’t love you anymore, or is it because it is this very act that brought to life the child for whom she is grieving. Do you know for sure that she is angry because you forgot to pick up something from the store, or is she angry at herself, or life or God, because her child is dead. Do we know that when he doesn’t talk about his son that he isn’t thinking about him and hurting deep inside, but can’t put it into words. How much different it would be if you simply asked him or her what she is really thinking or feeling. We assume we know what is going on inside our spouse’s head and heart and we react accordingly.

Usually we are wrong. If we asked and then listened, we might be surprised to find that what the other is really experiencing is very different from what we assume. If we react from false assumptions, our reactions are false. Remember, we judge ourselves from what we KNOW we are thinking and feeling, but we judge others from how we SEE them react. In other words, we judge ourselves by our insides, but we judge others by their outsides. This leads to false perspectives and assumptions. If this is done day after day, or week after week, even the best of marriages will crack under the strain. Stop assuming and ask straightforwardly what your spouse is feeling or thinking. Then you can react in ways that are appropriate to the situation.

Unrealistic expectations of each other are another source of strain on the marriage. Grief is as debilitating as anything can be. For much of our grief we are not even sure we will survive, much less ever find peace again. We can’t hold ourselves up, how can we expect to hold up the other. Can a spouse be expected to be sad and cry with his wife when he comes home from work, when he has struggled all day to push away painful thoughts and tears that wanted to flow at work? Can a wife be expected to be smiling and cheerful at night when she has spent the day in the house that screams of the lost child? Can a father be expected to let his emotions and tears flow freely when for years everyone has told him

to “be a man”? Can a wife be expected to handle her own pain when she has been told for years that she needs a man to depend on?.

The answer to these question is a resounding No. We need to accept and respect the differences in ourselves and our spouses. We have different coping mechanisms, and it is unfair and unrealistic to expect from the other that he or she is incapable of giving.

There are a number of things you can do. First, recognize that conditioning is a working force within each of you. Accept the differences in you and your spouse’s way of reacting to situations. This may be a good time to look at the boxes we have been put into and ask ourselves why men are not supposed to cry, or why can’t a man share his innermost feelings with another man. We might ask why women are expected to carry a heavier load of family care, or why women are supposed to lean on their husbands. We might ask what does strength in men really mean?, or what does “weak” mean for women? We must look carefully at these stereotyped characteristics and ask if they are really valid. Instead, we must decide what it is that we feel, and then allow ourselves to feel that way.

Another thing we can do is to be as open and honest with our spouse as we can about our feelings, thoughts and needs. For many of us this is not easy to do, but the results can be most rewarding.

Compromise is another way. It’s not possible to do what the other asks all the time, so try a compromise such as “two nights a week I’ll make every effort to be cheerful when you come home from work, if two other nights you will sit with me and we will talk about our son”, or “since you don’t like to see her picture all around the house, I’ll put them in the spare bedroom and the kitchen.” Compromise can be made on whatever is a source of dissension between the two of you.

If communication and/or compromise is not possible then simply accept the other as the individual he or she is and try to let go of your expectations of the other.

There are things we can do as individuals. For women it is important to have friends, hopefully another bereaved mother. She’ll understand what you are going through. It is also important to have a friend who is not bereaved in order to keep a perspective on life outside bereavement. The non-bereaved friend will be a link to the non-grieving world which you need to remain in touch with. Working mothers may need to take more time off from work or be more flexible with work hours. “At home” mothers need time away from

the house. Sitters are indispensable to a bereaved mother. It is important to spend time away from the place that constantly reminds us of our child.

All bereaved parents need to take special care of themselves physically because of their lowered resistance to illness, but this seems to be especially difficult for women. Women must take time for themselves do things that gives them pleasure. Take time for a bubble bath, or an afternoon shopping trip. Buy yourself some little thing you have been wanting. Even though your appetite may not be very good force yourself to eat at least small amounts of nutritious foods daily. If eating is normally your way of coping with stress, be careful. Putting on excess weight can lead to other problems. Exercise regularly. Walking is not strenuous and requires little effort, but it is good for you. In addition it gets you out of the house for a time. Try to keep yourself neat and attractive. If you look better, you feel better. Try a new hobby. Get a new hair style, take a class. Do something for yourself. I don’t recommend dieting or stopping smoking during the hardest part of your grief. Don’t put yourself through the added misery of these efforts at this time. It is hard for women to think about themselves before their families, but during bereavement, it’s not only necessary for the bereaved mother, but the family too will profit if mother feels better. Remember, you can’t be good for another if you’re not good for yourself.

Because of lowered energy level you may need help. Ask for it and accept it. Have a family conference and divide up the work load. The whole family has less energy, but if the work is divided between a number of people it won’t be too much for anyone. This could have the additional positive result of giving other family members an opportunity to do for you when they might not have known what they could do. If a neighbor or friend asks what they can do, tell them. Let them run an errand, or baby sit, or wash a kitchen floor. You will make them feel good that they could be of help to you, and you will have the help you need.

Men need to recognize that they are not the super-human rocks they have been told they are supposed to be. Actually, they are human beings who have been terribly hurt. They need to recognize that no matter what they have been told, they must not deny their need to grieve. The father has lost the same child the mother did, and while his relationship, hopes, and expectations of his child may be different, none-the-less, his pain is just as real as his wife’s, and must be dealt with

and expressed. No one can expect fathers to totally wipe out years of conditioning, but they can find ways to make some changes in that conditioning. Men need to express their grief, not only in appropriate ways, but in ways that are acceptable to them.

Bereaved fathers need to accept their lowered energy levels as a normal part of grief and allow themselves to give into it. Cut down on activities that are not absolutely necessary. Give yourself permission to take it easy. If possible, cut down on your workload. Explain to your employer that you are having difficulty with fatigue and confusion. Few employers are cognizant of the manifestations of grief. They might be understanding if they know that your reactions are a normal part of grief.

Many fathers find it hard to attend Compassionate Friends meetings, but this is where the biggest help can be found. With another father they can talk about their angers and guilts and how difficult it is to allow their emotions to be experienced. Bereaved fathers can relate to other bereaved fathers, learn from them.

Hard physical exercise is helpful for men. But, they must be sure to check with their doctor to see if it is safe. With exercise a father can express anger, guilt and frustration in a positive way.

Some men find a punching bag or chopping block an especially good source for getting out emotions.

Fathers must allow themselves to cry. This is imperative. Fathers may have learned to NOT CRY. I am suggesting that they learn TO CRY. Use a photo of your child or another of his possessions to bring up the tears. Hold the article or picture of your child and let yourself get in touch with how painful it is that he or she is not here. If you cannot cry in front of others, cry alone.

Go to the cemetery to cry, or somewhere where no one will see you. However you do it, remember that crying is essential to relieving a good part of the pressure caused by your child's death.

Sexual relations in the bereaved marriage may be difficult. It can be a great source of hurt and misunderstandings. The key words are communication, openness and patience.

Sex means different things to different people. To one spouse the sex act is an expression of love and need and closeness. To the other it is a reminder that this is the very act that brought the child into existence. One spouse may find sexual

intercourse a help in his/her grief, while the other may find it repulsive. Some may have mixed feelings about it. There may be feelings of guilt at enjoying sex while their child lay dead. Other parents feel guilty that they can enjoy sex amid the terrible devastation of grief.

There is no right or wrong concerning sexual relations. Try to be as open to each other about wants and needs as you can be. Here again, compromise may work, but most important of all is patience with each other.

Remember that wanting sex is not simply personal gratification. It can be an expression of deeper emotions. On the other hand, not wanting sex doesn't mean the lack of love of the other, but a deep personal hurt that precludes sex.

In summary, don't expect or assume anything concerning your spouse. Be as open as you can with each other about what you need and what you can or cannot give. Recognize that each of you is different, think differently, and act and react differently, and that each have different mechanisms for coping. Respect that. Allow each other the time and space to grieve his or her own way.

Marriage can be a deeply rewarding and fulfilling relationship, but it doesn't just happen. It must be worked at, nurtured and renewed. So it is with the bereaved marriage. Just as we are different people after our child died, so is the marriage. If it is to survive, it must be worked at. We can become stronger people after our child dies, and so can our marriage.