

COPING AS A COUPLE

Connecting when grief separates

“He learned then about the isolation of grief, even for those in the same grief. Grief can’t be shared. Everyone carries it alone, his own burden, his own way.”—Anne Morrow Lindbergh, Dearly Beloved

Marriage or partnership, no matter the circumstances, always takes effort and work. Although the death of a child represents a shared experience, couples often complain that the grief process creates division and separation. Many couples struggle with the effort to honor their own grief, understand and be respectful of their partner’s grief and maintain a healthy relationship. This effort takes enormous energy at a time when both partners may feel depleted and spent.

“Grieving parents are survivors” (Rando 1986, 176), and each survivor travels this lonely and painful road in a way each maps out. In traveling this road, parents often respond differently, learn to live with their grief separately and express their sadness uniquely. Grieving parents can and often do feel alone, disconnected and alienated.

They need to know that there are many ways to grieve; there is no time table for grief’s duration; there are no rules, boundaries, or protocols for grieving. There are also some commonalities of parental grief. Some examples may include an overwhelming sense of its magnitude, a sense that the pain will last forever, a sense that the grief is etched into one’s very being.

For most grieving parents, it is vitally important to verbalize the pain, to talk about what happened, to ask questions and puzzle aloud—sometimes over and over. It is also important for parents to express their anger outwardly so that it will not turn inward and possibly become a destructive force in the future. Two responses experienced most commonly by bereaved parents are a baffling sense of disorientation and a deep conviction that they must never let go of the grief.

Understanding that men and women process their grief differently can help in the process of reconnecting and coping after the death of a child. Although individuality and personality always outweigh generalizations; it can be helpful to learn some general gender differences in grief.

Grief for men tends to be more internal and may be less visible. Sometimes identified as *instrumental grievers*, they may speak of their grief in an intellectual way, possibly appearing cold and uncaring to others. They are most comfortable with seeking accurate information, analyzing facts, making informed decisions and taking action to solve problems. They may appear to remain strong, dispassionate and detached in the



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face of powerful emotions. They deal with their loss by focusing on goal-oriented activities. Often men are considered to be more “grief thinkers” than “grief feelers.”

Women, on the other hand, often live in a world characterized by a network of support and acceptance. Identified as intuitive grievers, women may express a full range of emotions in response to grief. Comfortable with strong emotions and tears, they are sensitive to their own feelings and to the feelings of others. Since they feel strong emotions so deeply, they’re less able to rationalize and intellectualize the pain of grief and more likely to appear overwhelmed and devastated.

Despite these generalizations, it is important to remember that people are individuals first. Many women may be instrumental grievers and many men will openly express their grief feelings.

Even though we all grieve differently, there is a great need to connect at a time of disconnect and distance. How can a marriage or partnership in mourning find the path to healing and hope after the death of a child? Each couples’ journey will be uniquely peppered with challenges and triumphs.

Open, honest communication becomes paramount for healthy coping. Couples that can incorporate the following strategies may find their own path to healing.

- Make the commitment to grieve as individuals and as a couple. Recognize your shared grief experiences and those that are unique to one or the other.
- Redefine your bond; not just as parents, but also as partners. Remember the many ways you are connected as a couple.
- Spend time together doing things outside of the house, even something as simple as taking a walk around the block.
- Create an atmosphere of patience; grief can be very intense during the early months.
- Find rituals that allow for the different expressions of grief.
- Find ways to laugh with one another and find moments of joy.

It is most important that each partner give the other permission to grieve as he/she needs. This may be the greatest gift each can give the other. Although we often understand grief to be a personal burden to be carried alone, it is important to find those moments when we can share our sadness, unload our burden and reconnect with the one who understands this profound loss as we do.

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