

March 7th meeting ... This month our topic will be: How Men and Women grieve differently and its effect on marriage. It may seem your spouse (whom you thought would understand what you are going through) is unable to help you with the pain caused by the loss of your child. Most people find that you will not necessarily deal with your loss in the same way or time frame. This is normal and happens to most parents.

This month we will be offering insights into the different ways men and women face their grief. (Keep in mind that personality traits also come into play. We are talking generalities here. You will probably see aspects of your way of grieving in both the way men and in the way women grieve differently.) We invite you to join us as we share different insights and pitfalls often encountered when individual grieving styles, and the stress it can put on a marriage, are added to your loss.

But It Hurts Differently ...

There is no way to predict how you will feel. The reactions to grief are not like recipes with different ingredients and certain results. Each person mourns in a different way. You may cry hysterically or you may remain outwardly controlled, showing little emotion. You may lash out in anger against your family and friends, or you may express your gratitude for their concern and dedication. You may be calm one moment - in turmoil the next. Reactions are varied and contradictory. Grief is universal. At the same time it is extremely personal. Heal in your own way.

--Rabbi Earl Groliman



Voice

I've been pondering for some time the reasons why my husband and I have been able to weather the storm since the deaths of our two 16 year old sons, one in June '89, the other in Sept. '91. I think the best comparison is that we were each in our own little rowboat tethered to each other with a very long rope, so that with every 12 foot swell neither of us was overwhelmed by the drenching waters. We were able to bail when needed, and were able to paddle to one another, but the rope was never

too taught or loose.

Something worked, as we just had our 26th anniversary in Feb. So many bereaved marriages don't make it through the storm. This newsletter is therefore focusing on the bereaved marriage, in hopes that it can provide some tools for us to use to help us keep and promote a stable marriage, when it seems all else makes no sense. I wish you all the best.

--Val Mason, editor, TCF Pocatello, ID

Especially for Fathers: the Male Viewpoint

The bereaved father suffers severely in the lonely pew of suppressed grief. He endures not only the psychological impact of losing his child but the fear of losing his masculine identity by publicly displaying his distress. In building an image to fit what our society expects, a man who openly reveals his emotions, during a time of tragedy, feels he is looked down upon in most quarters. We are taught to expect a man to be strong in a time of crisis, strong in time of war, strong under fire. But what society does not fathom is that the loss of a child doesn't rank with other stress emotions. The loss of one's child transcends the barrier of do's and don'ts for emotional behavior. The honest gut emotions of cleansing the soul with tears of grief is akin to lancing a wound to drain the infection. A man or a woman is entitled to the right of expiating sorrow.

Men should be made aware that it is a natural response for them to experience the same upheaval, in grieving the death of a child that women do. In suffering the loss of such magnitude, it is also natural for a man to find himself dealing with periods of anger, guilt, moroseness, anxiety, frustration, and other real and gnawing thoughts. Grieving is a period of adjustment, for men as well as women.

Many fathers refrain from acknowledging that they continue to experience this grief in the belief they have to mask their feelings, to hide them from view lest they be considered weak or unmanly. In so doing, they commit a great injustice to themselves. For like the octaves on a piano, a man should be able to display emotions in any range and grow from them.

-- TCF, Albany, New York

Marriage at Risk

The loss of a child can also lead to the loss of a marriage



Early in my work with grieving people, I learned about the distinct individuality of bereavement. It was then I coined the phrase, "Grief is a journey the heart makes alone." Each time I see two parents trying to come to terms with the loss of their child, that particular phrase rings a resounding truth for me again.

When a couple must face the death of a child and the aftermath of reality and readjustment, one might think the tragedy would naturally draw them closer. After all, they have lost a precious life. They both have suffered shock, mental anguish, despair, anger, guilt, helplessness, and loss of future dreams and plans.

Both parents are faced with a grieving process from which there is no escape. Both their lives have been drastically and irrevocably changed forever. And yet with all the sameness we can list, no two individuals will respond to this major life-changing event in quite the same way. Each parent's brings to this event his or her own life experiences, emotional stability levels, ways of communication and expression, and very individual ways of coping with the prolonged stress that grief produces.

Each parent's emotional investment is weighted differently. Each parent saw the child differently, their dependency needs and the position they assumed within the family structure had different values. Their love and their ambivalence toward their child comes from very separate places because no matter how close parents are as a couple, they do not think alike nor do they approach the healing process of bereavement with a matched set of burdens.

While grieving, two parents may find themselves in opposite behavior styles. One may make wrongful assumptions about the other because they don't recognize that there are different ways to grieve. Not better nor worse; not right nor wrong; simply different.

Grief can be a powerful force with which to reckon. When individual patterns are resisted, misunderstanding can result in an irreparable rift between husband and wife. Research has indicated that about 83% of all couples have

serious marital problems after the loss of a child. There seems to be great difficulty in helping each other.

If a couple's communication process was less than ideal to begin with, the problems are now exacerbated. Often sexual expression which might have once drawn the couple closer is affected by the distancing; that occurs because of their different grieving styles.

Part of the problem stems from our acculturation process. Fathers are supposed to be the protectors of the family. They are considered controlling, strong and self-sufficient. Because we stereotype men in these ways, they reach adulthood thinking that the open expression of intense feelings is a sign of weakness. Loss of control is something that many men fear and they feel diminished by it.

The death of a child represents a sense of personal failure for a father and leaves him feeling helpless, angry, guilty and emotionally impotent. A high percentage of men try to remain stoic during bereavement, showing as little outward emotion as possible. They have a tendency to delete the deceased child's name from conversation at home. Many fail to respond to their wife's need to talk about the child by remaining aloof, quiet and unavailable.

Men often throw themselves into a frenzy of work or other activity which serves as a buffer for their emotions, as well as a physical release for the effects of sustained stress. It is not uncommon for a father to hold his wife responsible for the death of their child. Even if he never verbalizes this thought, it can be evident in his manner of speaking and behaving.

To find fault or to blame another is one way we deal with the painful feelings of failure. If lines of communication have been in good working order, they can usually be kept open during bereavement (if the parents are committed and willing to work together).

If communication has been strained or difficult, it will be unlikely to improve. Without good communication, grief can drive a wedge between partners and can eventually break them apart.

The grief of mothers manifests in a very different way. The role of women in our society dictates that the mother is a nurturing, care-giving and central figure in the family. One of her roles

is that of communication. She communicates with each family member, and helps them to communicate with each other. Generally speaking she, carries the emotional burden of the family and she, more than the others, endeavors to create family unity.

When a child dies, the mother grieves not only for the loss of her, child but also for the loss of family balance. Each child has a separate, and very important role in the family structure. At a time when she feels powerless and vulnerable, her needs for nurturing may be greater than ever before. She may turn to her husband only to find him distant, repressed and incapable of offering consolation. These are two very separate and vastly different ways of coping with the same loss. And therein lies the problem.

Fathers usually feel more comfortable and more able to be in control of their emotions by employing a non-verbal approach to grief. Mothers more often feel the need to talk, sometimes incessantly, about their child and about all the circumstances leading to the death. They may wish to fully express their emotions and have been told by society that it is perfectly acceptable to cry.

The alienation caused by each parent's inability to share and to understand the other's way of grieving promotes isolation that often grows into an all consuming resentment. At the most difficult time of their lives, they find the one person they counted on for help has failed them. Their needs for comfort and caring concern go unmet and thus the distance between them grows at an alarming rate.

Now, that we are aware of what is likely to happen in a marriage after the death of a child, what can be done to prevent this unwanted result? I have a formula that, if followed closely by two committed parents, will be effective: *Get educated about grief and get help early.*

I have found that the couples who seek information learn to understand each other. They learn to communicate well. They accept different forms of expression and they find ways to help each other so that each person's needs are met. They learn how to combat isolation and distancing and in doing these things they avoid the loss of their marriage. Not all couples need counseling after the loss of their child but every

couple can use some education and some guidelines if they are to safely navigate some of the most troubled waters they will ever cross.

It is hard to be objective during a major life change and therefore many couples don't realize they need help until it is too late. Many parents feel that their grief is so unique that no one could possibly understand their pain. And while it is true that every grief process is an individual one, there are many common components. When these are shared with other parents, the emotional support that results can be highly therapeutic.

Try attending a few support group sessions. Attending only one session doesn't give you a chance to gather information, express yourself or feel comfortable. Commit to going at least three times consecutively before deciding if that is the group for you. Asking for help in a time of crisis is a sign of strength, not weakness, and it may make the difference between success or failure in a marriage where two parents strive to find ways of coping with their monumental loss.

The following organizations are invaluable resources for recovery for grieving parents. Please call or write the appropriate group for the location of your nearest chapter.

The Compassionate Friends, P.O. Box 3696
Oakbrook, IL 60522 (877) 969-0010

HAND (Helping After Neonatal Death), P.O. Box
341, Los Gatos, CA 95031 (408) 732-3228

Candlelighters Childhood Cancer Foundation
7910 Woodmont Ave., Suite 460, Bethesda,
MD 20814 (800) 366-2223

Pregnancy & Infant Loss Center 5150
Candlewood Street, Suite 19F Lakewood, CA
90713 (310) 867-4989

The National SIDS Foundation 1314 Bedford
Ave., Suite. 210 Baltimore, MD 21208
(800) 221-SIDS. (24 hr. Hotline)

MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) 511 East
John Carpenter Freeway., Suite 700 Irving,
TX 75062 (800) 438-6233 (24 hr. Hotline)

Survivors of Suicide P.O. Box 1393 Dayton, OH
45401 (513) 297-4777 (24 hr. Hotline)
or (513) 297-9096 (Group Information)

Parents of Murdered Children 100 East 8th Street,
Suite B-41 Cincinnati, OH 45202 (513) 721-
5683

--Margie Kennedy-Reeves, Ph.D.

