

HOW GRIEF CAN AFFECT A MARRIAGE

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The same kind of character that is used in the Chinese language to signify crisis is also used to express both opportunity and danger. Most couples who have experienced the death of their child have also experienced a crisis in their marriage as a result. For some this untimely difficulty has become a rich opportunity for growth bringing the two closer together. But for others the death of their child has been the beginning of the end of their marriage. A widely held belief that a bereaved couple is doomed to divorce is overly pessimistic and needs to be challenged. A more realistic approach is one that acknowledges the danger signs but also recognizes the enormous opportunities for growth.

Each person grieves in his or her own unique way. This is true even for two parents who are grieving the loss of the same child. It is not uncommon, however, for one partner to evaluate the other partner's grieving process based on his or her own style of grieving. He wants her to behave just like he does, and vice versa. If she cries, she thinks he should cry. If he doesn't want to talk he thinks she shouldn't need to talk either.

Behind this pressure to conform is the subtle assumption that one partner's grief will be validated by the behavior of the other partner. In truth, however, how one will most naturally respond to grief, as a man or as a woman, is conditioned by other factors: one's individual personality, one's previous experiences, the cultural role one has inherited from parents, and the unique relationship one has had with the one who died.

Dealing with the grief factor in a relationship is like driving a car with only one cylinder working. Because grief is both physically and emotionally exhausting some people admit they just don't have the energy to care enough to make their marriage work. That doesn't mean the love is gone, only the energy. But know this as grieving partners: Your marriage not only can survive but thrive if both of you are willing to make your relationship a priority during this difficult time.

Below are some dangers to watch for:

Be aware of any tendency to want to inflict on to your partner the hurt that you are feeling. It is not uncommon for persons who hurt to do hurtful things, even to those they love. Misery loves company and you may find yourself wanting to make sure your partner is suffering as much as you are, by means of sarcastic comments, harmful accusations, and emotional withdrawal as a means of punishment. Be aware that, in those times when you feel empty and without love to spare, you can be pretty ugly and most unbearable to live with. Give your partner a break!

Don't expect your partner to be your sole source of emotional support. To do so is not only unfair, but also unwise. Allow some distance between the two of you at times so you don't drag your partner into your pit of gloom on those really bad days. Because men in particular tend to express grief for a shorter period of time than their partners (note that I said express, not experience), some tend to get impatient if they have to face a sullen partner day after day.

Sometimes enlist others to listen when you need to express your feelings. Talking about your loss with others helps to take the edge off the stress build up, which then helps in your overall relationship with your partner. It also allows your partner some distance from your pain, which sometimes is good for both of you.

Keep a list of names and phone numbers of other persons that you can call on short notice.

When you and your partner can't talk with each other because the pain is too great, write notes to each other.

Look for ways that you can please your partner or at least ease some of your partner's pain.

None of these suggestions is necessarily easy when you are already dealing with how hard it is to even get up in the morning, or make a decision about what to eat for breakfast. To do what you need to do in a relationship requires the desire to be in touch with how your own grief affects others. It will also help if you have the willingness to see this experience in your life as an opportunity to learn something new about how your partner experiences life in the sad times as well as the good times.