

How Differently We Grieve!

As a couple, you may notice that your baby's death affects your relationship: sometimes for better, sometimes for worse. As a couple, you may alternate between intimacy and isolation. This may be the first tragedy you've faced together, and you may discover new ways of being there for each other. However, the stress of grieving can make you so needy on an individual level that it can be difficult to support each other. Often you will grieve very differently from each other, making it difficult for you to empathize or accept each other's feelings.

Distinct styles of grieving can be attributed to normal variations in personality, socialization, philosophy, coping style and, in the case of women, postpartum hormonal changes. Mothers and fathers also grieve differently because they usually feel different levels of bonding to the baby. There is no right or wrong here.

Give yourselves permission to have your feelings and give your feelings permission to be different from your partner's. You are entitled to your own feelings. Take responsibility for your reactions. They rise out of your perceptions and your body. No one can "make" you feel a certain way. Instead of blaming your partner for making you so angry, crazy, fearful or sad, see those feelings as your own reactions, arising out of your own issues. Instead of seeing yourself as a victim, claim creation of your feelings. In doing so, you will also claim the power to face and deal with them. If you can understand where these differences come from, you may feel less threatened by them. Acceptance is also easier if you remember that there are no "right" or "wrong" ways to grieve, and no two people grieve alike. What's important is what is right for you. Feelings are not right or wrong, they just are.

It is important to avoid judging each other. By simply accepting your partner's feelings, you are acknowledging that he or she is entitled to his or her feelings, just as you are entitled to yours. You may not share your partner's feelings; you may not always understand them. You may even feel angry or disappointed at your partner's reactions. But by accepting each other's silences and tears without judging or placing blame, you encourage nonthreatening communication. You also provide the kind of support and understanding so necessary to promote healing and to enhance your relationship.

Change will occur in both partners as a result of a baby's death. Many changes that occur can give rise to conflict. Some of the conflicts that might arise:

- Searching for and adopting new philosophies, perspectives, goals, desires and assumptions about your life, its meaning and direction
- Questioning your religious beliefs and faith
- Having a new awareness of your needs and emotions; wanting to become more assertive and expressive
- Dealing with a resurgence of grief from past losses
- Having varying and different intimacy needs
- Having varying and different desires for another baby
- Having disagreements about handling your other children's feelings and behaviors
- Having disagreements about how much information to share with other people, such as information about difficult decisions, experiences, feelings and other personal matters
- Experiencing the end of the "honeymoon period" that existed around the time of death

- Enduring the stress of grieving for your baby, along with the normal feelings of anger or depression
- Walking differing paths of grief: you cannot always grieve together or be supportive
- Harboring negative reactions to your partner's coping style, religious views or need to dwell on memories and mementos
- Experiencing differences in how easily each of you adapt to change
- Having different levels of tolerance for conflicts or distance

Acknowledging these changes and conflicts can help you weather them. It may also help you and your partner to openly discuss these matters. Listening without trying to "fix" the other is key. Grieving is a process. Grieving takes time. To grieve is to heal.

The key ingredients to help your relationship survive and grow despite this tragedy include caring about each other, sharing thoughts and feelings, accepting your differences and reassuring your partner that you are committed to the relationship.

Sex and Intimacy after the Loss of a Baby

As couples, you must recognize that grief most probably will have an impact on your sexual relationship for a while, and that this may be totally unrelated to your feelings of love for one another. For some couples, sex provides the intimacy and reassurance they need from each other. However, for many couples, sex becomes a tension point. When a couple is drained emotionally and physically, when they feel depressed or angry, or when communication breaks down, sex may be the last thing they desire. For many parents, the link between sex and conception is painfully obvious. For others, the association between sex and affection makes them feel hurt by their partner's lack of desire. Mothers must also cope with natural postpartum physical and emotional changes that can make them less responsive.

Sexuality and physical closeness are biological needs that seek balance. As with grief, sexuality after a loss is extremely unique to each person. By coming together sexually after the loss of a baby, a couple may be able to briefly put aside their grieving and feel close to each other, connecting themselves to the flow of life again. It is not uncommon for couples to need tenderness and nurturing more than intercourse initially. Further, some women or men may have an aversion to sex at first because they feel their present agony had its beginning there. Fear of a new pregnancy and by the extension, the possibility of another loss can be inhibiting. Sometimes sex can be used to cover up feelings of grief so the pain doesn't have to be faced. Guilty feelings may interfere with enjoying one another.

Depression is part of the grief experience. Depression can temporarily cut off feelings of sexual desire. Temporary sexual disturbances in both men and women are normal.

It is important to talk openly with your partner about your feelings and anxieties so that your reactions won't be misinterpreted. Negotiating your sexual relationship requires more nurturing, sharing, acceptance and reassurance. Be sensitive to your own and each other's emotional needs during this stressful time. By talking, listening and holding each other, you can maintain feelings of affection and intimacy without the pressures of intercourse. With patience, mutual tolerance and understanding, the problems will resolve themselves as healing progresses. Getting away to be alone together may help. If problems persist far into the second year of grieving, seek professional help.

Grief will change each of you individually, as well as your marriage and family as a whole. It is not something that needs to be feared, but rather an opportunity to know yourself and each other better. It can be an opportunity to grow.

As a couple, you may want to write down answers individually to these and other questions and come together to share your thoughts and feelings. It is an excellent way to communicate and come to some understanding.

Some questions you may ask yourself:

- ❑ What are my needs regarding closeness, sensuality, and sexuality? What would be good for me?
- ❑ What is it I don't want at this time?
- ❑ Do I allow myself sexual feelings, or do I think that wouldn't be okay?
- ❑ Am I afraid of sex because, theoretically, it could lead to a new pregnancy and another loss?
- ❑ Can I talk openly with my partner about my feelings and my needs and also about what may not be possible right now?
- ❑ If we haven't been sleeping together, how does that affect me? What can I do to prevent too much tension from building in me?
- ❑ If our relationship is troubled right now, with whom do I want to talk about it?
- ❑ Are our difficulties serious enough to warrant professional help?

Suggestions for Couples

- Let your relationship be your number one priority.
- Be patient with yourself and your partner.
- Try to accept that your partner isn't at the same place in the grief process you are.
- Strive for openness honesty and kindness in your communications.
- Allow your own feelings. Communicate what goes on inside of you and give your partner the chance to express his or her pain.
- Give one another room to grow in the relationship.
- Work at increasing your affection, caring and respect for each other. Discover ways to nurture and express these feelings.
- Enhance one another's healing through physical closeness and touch.
- Encourage one another to enjoy life and each other. Laugh together, cry together. Discover things to do together that bring you joy.
- Find support from sources other than your partner
- Nurture the thought together that, as precious as your baby is to you, there is still much worth living for.