

The Impact of Grief on Marriage

The reaction to the death of a baby is as individual as the person experiencing it.

Spouses or partners often grieve in different ways, frequently misunderstanding each other's reactions or needs. You may be reluctant to express feelings of sadness when your partner has had a "good day" or vice versa. Some partners may not want to talk about the death but still feel comfortable when the other needs to do so.

Crying is another area where partners may differ. It is an acceptable and healthy expression of grief but many fathers may find it difficult to allow themselves to release built-up tension through crying. Fathers often feel the need and are encouraged by others to be strong, but crying is a normal and healthy reaction.

Grieving is emotionally, physically, and mentally exhausting and does not leave much energy for anything else. Communication may be difficult but it is essential so that misunderstandings and intense emotions do not lead to problems in the marriage. Grief, however, is stressful and couples need to be aware that grief does not always bring partners closer together.

It is helpful when spouses recognize these differences and do not blame each other or feel the other does not care or is not hurting. It is more likely a difference in the ability to express intense feelings rather than a deliberate attempt to hurt. Continue to share your feelings and keep in mind that outward expressions of grief may indicate only a portion of what a person is feeling or experiencing.

Husbands and wives may react differently to intimacy as well. While one partner may need and seek this closeness and the assurance that not everything has changed, the other partner may take the suggestion of intimacy as an affront, not understanding how anyone could think of intimacy when a baby has died. Recognize that these reactions are normal. With time and patience, most couples reestablish intimacy when both feel ready.

It is important for couples to understand that there are no simple solutions to these problems, no timetable, or recipe for recovery. Every effort should be made to share what you are feeling. Your relationship may be uncomfortable for a while as you cope with these intense feelings and emotions.

Pictures and other mementos seem to help parents grieve. Parents, however, who experienced miscarriage or infant death, may have few of these. Many parents create memories by keeping a baby book or a special box containing hospital records, certificates, sympathy cards, pictures, and blankets. Spend time with and talk with other parents who have experienced a similar loss. Sharing with these parents, in an atmosphere of acceptance and understanding, can ease the loneliness and isolation of grief. Those who have "been there" can truly understand and accept your grief. These parents can help you to understand that the most painful aspects of grief will soften over time and that you are not alone in your grief.