

Grief and a Marriage

Baptist Burden Bearers

Research Results

There have been numerous surveys conducted by various organizations attempting to determine the effects of grief on a marriage. The main focus has been the impact of losing a child and whether or not the marriage was able to survive the stress that was placed on it. While the results have shown conflicting conclusions there is one truth that remains. Many marriages *do not* survive and many of those that do survive also suffer long lasting evidence of the pain and suffering involved. Our purpose in this writing is to provide some education and help that will enable a marriage to strengthen rather than fall apart when tragedy strikes.

Spouses Grieve Differently

Since people grieve differently we must remember that spouses may also grieve differently. This can create a severe strain on a relationship. If one spouse wants to talk out their grief and the other spouse handles their grief internally it could lead to disastrous results. Both spouses ... and their children ... must realize that everyone may handle their grief differently and respond accordingly.

Understand the Needs of Your Spouse

When both husband and wife are drowning in grief it's almost impossible to rescue each other. One spouse may want photos of a lost child displayed in the home and the other spouse may find it too painful to constantly see their picture. Again, one may want to constantly talk about their loss and the other may need a lot of "alone" time. Realize these differences and make a serious

Seek Outside Counsel When Necessary

We all need advisors in our life. This is especially true when it comes to handling grief. Reaching out to a seasoned counselor or pastor is always a *good thing* to do. That doesn't mean that the marriage is "in trouble". It simply means that both spouses are realizing the need for some guidance in dealing with their grief and their marriage issues at the same time. The best practice would be to approach your counselor/pastor *before* problems arise and get his advice about dealing with issues that have yet to arise.

Be Open and Honest With Each Other

You can't expect your spouse to know what you need and act accordingly. As well as couples may know each other when it comes to experiencing grief it is a whole new world. When parents lose a child through death it is a once in a lifetime event. This type of grief isn't dealt with every day so both husband and wife are plunged into a whole new world of physical emotions and spiritual questions. There are questions about each other that have never been addressed in the past. Therefore you must *talk openly* to each other and be honest on your feelings and needs. Then when your spouse does open up about certain issues don't be offended or disappointed about the problem.

Don't Criticize Each Other

You must allow your spouse to walk through their grief in their own way. That doesn't mean that you allow them to do something that is harmful to themselves or others but it does mean that you let them grieve in their own way. Don't judge them or try and make them grieve in a certain mold. Don't complain about the way they grieve just as you wouldn't want them to complain about your grief.

Be a Sounding Board for Each Other

Grief creates a lot of stress, tension and frustration on the inside. This needs to come out and your spouse should be the best one to help you with it. Therefore when your husband/wife needs to cry, scream and yell at the world just sit back and listen. Don't take it personally and don't respond back negatively. It's better that they take out their grief pains on you than someone else.

Be Aware of the Effects on Intimacy

Whenever a couple endure a severe grief event ... especially the death of a child ... it can have a devastating effect on intimacy in the marriage. Husbands and wives may have different physical needs when life is normal but when dealing with grief it could considerably intensify those differences. A wise move would be to seek advice from a trusted counselor or pastor.

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Don't Ignore Other Family Members

Far too many times when parents are dealing with grief their children are ignored and left to grieve on their own. You must consider everyone in the family and find a way to grieve together. This includes grandparents or other extended family that may be living in the home.

Purposely Plan Fun Times Together

Life must still go on after a tragic grief event. Children have a built in "regulator" that allows them to grieve ... then laugh ... then grieve but adults try to grieve and grieve and grieve. Two very important aspects are involved with this issue. Since grief is a negative force in our lives we have to insert positive forces *on purpose*. If we don't then the negatives of grief will control us. Also, since our entire being is silently crying out for relief we will naturally ... and subconsciously ... move toward the positive. If our family doesn't supply that positive then the temptation comes in to find it elsewhere. This is true for everyone in the family ... husbands, wives, teens and toddlers. Therefore we must make an effort to purposely include "fun" things as we travel down the grief road.

Don't Blame Each Other

Whenever we endure a tragic loss one of the characteristics of the grief that follows is to find someone or something to blame. Life is supposed to run on a smooth, scheduled course and grief shouldn't be part of it. Therefore someone has to be blamed for upsetting the normalcy of life. However we should never look to our spouse for the object of blame. Whatever the reason for the grief it is in the past and our spouse should be our closest supporter. Assessing blame for a loss never accomplishes anything and that is especially true with our spouse.

Talk About Your Loss to Each Other

Research has shown that the greatest pain that someone can endure is the loss of a child. Undoubtedly ever parent would agree. When you experience such a loss you can't ... and shouldn't ... just try and go on with life and ignore your loss. You must talk about life, loss and the future. Your marriage will take a major shock and failing to talk about the loss will only contribute to the shock.

Don't Expect Too Much From Each Other

Since we grieve differently then we will obviously travel down the grief road in different ways. If one spouse is able to resume certain life functions sooner than the other it's a major mistake to expect the spouse to follow the same path. Allow each other to grieve in their own way and don't display any resentment or impatience when they don't progress as you would.

Find Agreements on Major Decisions

One serious issue to handle is major decisions that have to be made about life itself. That is especially true with decisions about a loss whether that be related to funeral arrangements, living conditions or financial issues. Work out your differences and reach out for help if necessary but never get into arguments and create more stress on the relationship.

Take Care of Yourself Physically

Many people naturally let their physical health deteriorate after a major loss especially when the loss is a child, a spouse or another close friend or family member. We feel that life as we knew it is over so physical health is that last thing to be concerned about. When those times come we need to remember that we still have to live for others in our life and the most important person should be our spouse.

Make It a Mission to Strengthen Your Marriage

Instead of letting grief and loss damage or even destroy your relationship use the pain and suffering to increase the bonds and commitment that hold you together. Spend more time together. That includes serious time and fun time, quality time and amount of time. Do things serving others together. Make it a goal ... together ... that your marriage will not only survive this tragedy but as life goes on your relationship will be stronger and sweeter than you could have previously imagined.