

A Father's Grief / A Mother's Grief *Maintaining Communication and Respect*

by Joanne Cacciatore

We all grieve in different ways
and at different times
I will respect your grief
And you will respect mine
So that separately
and together
We will heal. . .

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Remember the best selling book, "Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus?" Well, the same is true for grief. Most men grieve in Mars and most women in Venus. The statistics are grim. More than half the couples experience some degree of stress, leading to the consideration of divorce or separation. Why? There is a delicate balance that must be maintained in a relationship during the grief process. Life does go on, but normalcy is a tough task after the death of your baby. How does a couple grieve differently? How do they renew their communication?

To understand how, we must first understand why. Most men and women do grieve in different ways. As men and women, the basic components of our psyche are so different. It makes sense that in stressful situations, we may not all react in the same manner. Most men see the "big picture" while most women are detail oriented. He thinks and she feels. He is logical and realistic while she may be more intuitive and idealistic. He copes with stress and grief internally and she copes externally.

In many, but certainly not all, support group situations, women attend for longer periods of time and are generally more communicative and verbal. While both will handle the grief intrinsically unique from the other, both need the opportunity to express their feelings. The love of both parents should transcend any gender differences. When it comes to the grieving process, many fathers express a "making of peace" within 3-9 months. Most mothers, however, do not report that feeling of acceptance until 9-24 months or even longer.

How can you help a grieving mother, if she is your wife or partner? Remember that she may need to talk about the event a great deal. She is in the process of gathering every possible detail about your baby's death. It is as if she is playing the tape in her mind and rewinding it over and over again. She will ask questions that may be unanswerable, such as how or why? Be patient with her and listen. If you find yourself becoming frustrated with her, attend a support group meeting with her. It is a safe place for mom to review details of the event

unconditionally. The mother may want to visit the grave very frequently. She feels that this is her way to "take care" of her child. At the grave, she can care for and be close to the only physical part of your child she has left. Allow her to visit as often as she needs to. You do not have to go with her, however, don't discourage her or tell her it is unhealthy. This may be detrimental to the lines of communication.

Many mothers benefit from reading books on grief. Buy her a few books to share together. She knows in her heart that her life and the life of her family will never be the same. Acknowledge her pain, respect her feelings of deep loss and try not to rush her healing or offer a quick fix it for her grief. She will accept the tragedy over time, in her own time. Don't insinuate that she needs professional intervention because she has a desire to talk about your child. Talking about your child keeps his memory alive and helps her along the grief journey.

What about dealing with a father's grief? Many men, unlike women, feel uncomfortable discussing the death of his child. It is too deep and too emotional. Dad is the culturally recognized "Protector" and "Stronghold" of the family. It is his duty to remain strong and unyielding. Even if his heart is breaking, he may have difficulty expressing it openly. Do not push him to verbalize his feelings, but rather, encourage him by simply listening when he does choose to talk. If you attempt to comfort him while he is grieving, he may feel guilty for making you bear the burden of the "Protector" and quickly clean up his tears and move on to busy work. Remember that just listening is an effective way to support a grieving father.

While some mothers take comfort in their faith in God, some fathers have overwhelming feelings of anger toward God. He may express that the death of your child invalidates his faith and religion. Feelings of anger are a normal and healthy constituent of grief. Do not discredit his feelings. Remember that feelings are not right or wrong, they just are. He will work out the feelings of anger if he is doing his "grief work." Some fathers may not want to visit the cemetery as frequently as mom. Some may even have an aversion to it.

Mutual respect for each other is the best remedy in this situation. Be honest with each other about your needs and respect what the others desire is. Do not force him to accompany you on visits if he doesn't want to. He may resent you for it. Mothers may bury themselves in books about grief, while fathers generally indulge in hobbies, work or other activities that take his mind off the pain. He needs space to grieve in his own way, so try to avoid imposing alternate feelings of "what should be" on him. Often, a father expresses the desire to put things back to the way they were before and for mom to become the person she was before the baby's death. This may lead to conflict because mom realizes that things will never be the same. Again, honest communication of emotions and feelings will alleviate resentment and hostility.

After the death of a child, both parents will encounter the most difficult human experience. Here is an exercise that may assist a mom and dad during the process of grief:

1. Write down the emotions and elements that are unique in the mother's grief versus the elements that are unique to the father's grief. Then, take it one step further, and write down the elements of grief you have in common.
2. Establish three-one hour periods per week. Dedicate one hour to express and share the common elements of grief you shared the week prior. Dedicate the next hour to share one hour of intimacy where the death of your child is not discussed. Finally an hour dedicated to sharing with family members and other children the feelings of loss you have.

With honesty, respect, communication, compassion and love families can remain together, united and strong. Remember to give each other permission to grieve in your own way, and in your own time. Honor the differences and embrace the similarities. If you feel your marriage is in trouble, don't wait to get help. Seek counseling from a pastor, therapist or family counselor who is trained in marital issues. But it is also imperative that they are trained in grief support. While it may seem that months or years later, many of the family arguments involve issues not directly inclusive of your deceased child, some of the bitterness and anger may be a product of protracted and unresolved grief. It is impossible to discount the depth and devastation even years after the death of a child