



WHAT HAPPENS TO A MARRIAGE WHEN A CHILD DIES?

Couples vacation together, laugh together, cry together, and live life together. As a couple you expect to be able to lean on each other in the good and the bad times. When parents experience the death of a child, they realize that at the time of the greatest tragedy in their life, they are each an individual and they must mourn as an individual.

One doesn't expect to outlive a child. The fact appears to contradict nature. Funeral directors have observed that the grief of parents is much more intense than any other kind of grief. The death may be that of a baby, a school age child, a young adult, or even a "child" in their middle or senior years. The grief of the surviving parents seems to go on and on.

Marital friction is natural in any marriage. The death of a child compounds natural marital friction. Although couples share a tragedy, disaster and grief when a child dies these emotions do not necessarily create a tighter bond. Statistics point out the devastating effect the death of a child can have on parents. They also point out the need to understand what one is experiencing and how important it is to value both the marriage and the individual. There is an opportunity to come together in support and understanding, or to move apart in solitude, loneliness, and pain. Each couple will need to decide what they want their marriage to look and feel like.

Severe marital friction in bereaved parents may develop out of the ordinary everyday irritants of just plain living. You hurt so much and have no tolerance or lose your patience that it is easy to allow petty little things that you could handle before to become gigantic irritants.

Remember, that the death of a child is all-encompassing. Parents who expected to work as a team are functioning, healing and grieving as individuals. Some parents want to change everything while others do not want to disturb anything. One parent may want to put all pictures, mementos and reminders away, while the other parent may prefer to make a shrine of pictures and of the child's room and things. When one parent is having an "up" day, they resent their partner being down. The reverse is also true. When one person having a "down" day, it's hard to imagine how a spouse is able to feel so "up". It may look as if one mate is not hurting as much as another. This can cause jealousy and anger. Something as basic as the weather can affect a marriage. The sunny days may bring hope and warmth into one partner's life while the other spouse can't feel happy on such a nice day that their child isn't there to enjoy. The spouse who doesn't like the sunny days may feel that the grey, rainy days don't bother them whereas the other spouse's mood matches the grey, rainy day. Another problem is whether to discuss the child who died. Some parents can be at opposite ends about this. One may speak all the time about the child who



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has died and the other may never mention the child and may even refuse to let their partner speak of the child. Often the happy memories can be discussed by both but not the death and grief.

Another cause of marital friction may be mutual protectiveness. Couples may think that telling a partner how about how devastated they feel may make a spouse feel worse. There is the hurt from the death of the child and a caring person may want to protect their partner from the additional hurt of seeing a spouse in such pain. It is important to remember that couples are good at reading each other. Being honest about feelings and pain may be more productive than trying to push it down only to have it surface in other ways.

Socializing after the death can be looked at differently between spouses. Sometimes one partner will take the attitude that “we shouldn’t enjoy ourselves now that our child is dead”, whereas the other spouse may seek the opportunity to be with other people. Sometimes a spouse may even refuse to continue having sexual relations. This denial of pleasure with friends or as a couple may have a serious impact on the marriage. Another consideration is that some family members/friends will distance from the grieving parents. This is not out of malice but more from not knowing what to say or do. Also, as bereaved parents there are times that we are not the best company. This isolation by others can add to the marital strain.

The death may cause differing views of religion, even between parents of the same faith. One partner may turn away from religion or have a stock answer while the other made may search for answers within their faith and find immense comfort.

Unresolved grief turns inward and may become both mentally and physically destructive. Sometimes one parent will internalize the grief, ending up in a severe state of depression. Other times a parent may be so obsessed with grief that he/she cries continuously, causing much turmoil to the other parent and children.

So with all of these individual differences in grieving and healing, how do marriages last? How can it be that marriages survive and in some cases are strengthened?

1. It is crucial to recognize your vulnerability and not to take your spouse’s reactions personally. With the death of a child, the nervous system is raw. We experience deep and often mysterious feelings. It is scary and unnerving. This severe pain of grief brings out the humanness of both parents. We can see both the good and the bad side of our mates and ourselves. The temptation is to dwell on the negative. It is important to recognize the feelings and to see the negative side but then to work on the grief and to concentrate on the positive. Remember marriage is challenging at its best.



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2. Often times, it is may be helpful to find additional support systems, while continuing to value one's marriage. Identify friends or family who are not afraid of your pain, but don't feel the need to protect.
3. Trial and error, in time a couple can learn to grieve together by developing ways of understanding each other's needs more fully and by committing themselves to the recreation of their marriage.

Adapted from Hope for Bereaved Parents



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