

- * Try to be affectionate with each other, to stay in touch physically; hugging and touching are important. Help each other towards enjoying life again, try to laugh together as well as cry. Look for outings, hobbies, activities to do together and as a family.
- * The need to recall and reminisce from time to time about the child who has died always remains, and the person with whom this can be most fully shared is the other parent. Even so, there is a need to realise that life does exist beyond the death of the beloved child. As important as this daughter or son is, and as much as you feel the agony of her or his death, your relationship involves more than this child.
- * Your husband, wife or partner need not be the only source of healing. Contact with other bereaved parents through The Compassionate Friends can be very supportive; it helps a lot to realise that other couples are going through very similar experiences. New and lasting friendships are made because of shared grief. This is an unexpected aspect of TCF, which has spread all over the world.

The Compassionate Friends NSW Inc

is an organisation of bereaved parents, siblings and grand-parents offering friendship, understanding and support to one another

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GRIEVING COUPLES



In any relationship, we care for and support each other, but when a child dies the grief is so overwhelming that fathers and mothers are often unable to help each other. Though both parents are bereaved, they may express their grief so differently that many couples fear that their relationship is falling apart. Many women cry frequently and are able to talk openly about their pain, whereas most men have absorbed the message from family or society that "big boys don't cry"; tears are only permissible for a short time after the death. While some fathers do cry with other people, quite a number cry in private; consequently their tears are not known, and the myth that men don't cry is perpetuated.

Most men find it difficult to talk about their pain, and this suppression of grief can cause a man to appear cold, irritable, angry or depressed. Some men avoid going home after work because their going home to the mother who usually wants to talk about her or their grief or that of the surviving children- is just too much to bear. This attitude can make many wives and mothers feel that the husband "does not care"; "did not love the child as much", etc. Guilt and anger are experienced over some or all of these things, and the anger can often be directed at each other as the most convenient targets. Because all the feelings are so intense, and because the couple naturally are unable to step back and see what is happening, marriages and relationships can flounder and break up, leaving both partners with yet another loss to bear.

Grieving is an individual process and your partner may not be able to give you all the help you need. This can increase your sorrow and misery, and may turn to anger and bitterness. If, prior to the child's death there were problems in the marriage, this tragedy can cause them to recur.

Sexual intercourse may become an area of contention. For many men, the sexual act satisfies the feeling of being needed, gives comfort and releases tension, as well as being an expression of love. For mothers, the pleasure of the act and the association of love-making with child-bearing can cause feelings of guilt after the death of their child. A woman usually needs to feel relaxed to be able to participate in the sexual act, but this is difficult to achieve because of the stress and tension in grief. Even in relationships that were 'problem free' before the child died, sexual relationships can take a very long time to resume. We should not expect too much of each other.

Surviving brothers and sisters may be difficult or unmanageable because of their grief and the struggle to find their place in the re-structured family. This could be a source of strain for the parents; each may think differently about the way the behaviour should be handled, and this can cause friction. Alternatively they may feel so overwhelmed by the whole situation that they are unable to cope with the difficulties.

An understanding of the situation is the first step towards saving and strengthening a relationship or marriage. Some of the following suggestions may be helpful:

- * Talk to each other, although this can be difficult at first, it gets easier and is very rewarding ultimately.
- * Be patient with yourself and with each other. Recognise that it is normal and natural to grieve in different ways and at different paces.
- * Be aware of each other's mood swings, they may not coincide. Be understanding of each other's needs for time and privacy to grieve individually, and also for time together without the other children. Share household chores and support each other through bad patches and 'blue days'.
- * Try to understand and discuss how to handle the surviving children's grief. Talk together, and with them, about how they are coping; discussing what you will do with the dead child's clothes, books, sport equipment, bedroom. Seek help from others as and when necessary. The TCF Library has books which may be helpful in this situation.