



He Said, She Said- The Different Grieving Paths of Moms and Dads (Women and Men)

"Give me what I need, help me," she begged.

"No, you give me what I need, you help me," he replied

"You don't grieve at all," she said.

"All you ever do is cry," he said

Such is the journey with moms and dads as they struggle to find the way after the death of a child. "He" and "She" can be interchanged in all those statements, because there is no gender exclusivity to how we grieve. A father may go inward and the mother may cry. Or, a father may wear his grief on the outside and a mother may keep her pain hidden. Whichever way we endure our pain is how it works best for us. But it can be hurtful when grieving becomes a competition as to who misses or loves the child the most and who is grieving correctly. Add guilt or blame, and emotions are taken to a new and sometimes damaging level. The dramatic differences in grieving styles of moms and dads (or women and men in general) are not unusual. We are not alone in how we feel.

Since our husband or wife has been our closet supporter and best friend over the years, we expect that support to continue after a child dies. We shared everything when they were alive and we expect that to happen now that they died. We laughed with each other and now want to cry with each other, too. But, what we often find is that the person we expect to be able to lean on the most isn't there, and we fall. That confuses hurts and angers us. We think, "You've known what I needed in the past, why can't you see what I need now?" Either parent could say that. The mom and dad of a baby who has died have much in common, but also much they can't give each other. What we know is common suffering, our pain is equally intense, and we both feel the loss deeply. But since we are both in such turmoil and barely able to take care of ourselves, it can be impossible to give each other a safe place to grieve, a harbor for our broken heart where our way of grieving will be understood and respected. Our expectations of each other are high, often times too high. If you have those feelings of abandonment, they are not unusual and, with work, they can be resolved. As in all cases of needs and wants, communication is the key.

Once the thoughts of bringing home a healthy baby was "our" world. Both happy and sad times were "our" times. Decisions were made jointly; they were "our" decisions as to what was best for our child. For the most part, we were able to share our points of view and find a compromise that worked in the "our" world.



What we found was that “our” world had suddenly turned to an “I” world, because it had to for our survival. The realization that our closest partner couldn’t help us and that we couldn’t help them, was confusing. We asked, “So, if you can’t help me, what am I supposed to do with my suffering?”

The key to coming back to each other is talking and sharing...communication. It is paramount to share our pain with our partner and not judge or criticize his way of grieving. Some of us read books on grief and attend support groups. Others find writing, painting or gardening to be a good way to release the pain. There are also non-verbal ways of sharing our suffering. A hug, a back rub, flowers given with sympathy and empathy can go a long way to healing wounds that have been opened by our grief. Don’t make grieving a competition, make it a collaboration. Our patience will be tested as we see our partner progress at a different rate than us. We may not understand why they cry day after day when we no longer need to do that, or never have. Their anger may dissipate slower than ours. That’s ok. We are all different and it is reasonable that we all grieve differently.

Learn the power of “I’m sorry” and “I forgive you.” Work on making your common pain more about “we” and less about “me.” Understand that we are not perfect people. We don’t live in a perfect world and we all make mistakes. There’s no harm or dishonor in saying, “I made a mistake. I didn’t do that very well and would like another shot at it.” And don’t forget the healing power in a heartfelt “Thank you.” Those simple words of appreciation can bring people together.

We may need to ask for what we need from our partner, because they might not know. We have heard, or maybe said ourselves, “What do you want from me? What should I do?” If what you need is silence, ask for it. If what you need is a hug, ask for it. If what you need is someone you can feel safe with while you cry or scream your pain, ask for it. Try not to ask for understanding of your pain; that may be impossible. What you probably need is an understanding of how much you hurt. Also listen to what your partner’s needs are and give what you can. When you are able to help each other, also thank each other.

This is a tough journey, and there is no need to go through it alone. As parents, we hurt equally, but we aren’t born with the coping skills necessary to understand what is happening to us. Through constant and open communication, we can survive and even grow closer. It only takes that first word or a hug to get started.

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