

IMPACT OF GRIEF ON MARRIAGE

Initially drawn together by the shock and pain of loss, couples can find themselves disconnecting as the grief journey progresses. The divorce rate is high for couples who experience the loss of a child. There are reasons for this and ways to address your grief so as not to lose your marriage relationship in the process. We all grieve differently and need to be allowed to grieve in our own way, but at the same time we need to learn to grieve in sync with each other.



Billy and Suzy loved their little family of three and adored their two-year-old daughter, Lizzie with all their hearts (*not their real names*). They had been in a relationship for almost 7 years and had been thrilled welcoming Lizzie and beginning to grow their family. They had purchased a small starter home in the suburbs and were outside working in the yard on a sunny summer Sunday afternoon. Billy was planting shrubs on the side of the house and Suzy needed to make a quick trip to Home Depot for supplies. Having last seen Lizzie helping her daddy, Suzy grabbed her keys, got in the car and began backing the car out of the garage and down the drive. What Suzy didn't realize was that Lizzie had left her daddy and was riding her tricycle across the drive just as Suzy pulled out. In a split second the worst fears of a parent were realized.

Receiving a call and a quick description of the story, I met Billy, Suzy and some immediate family at the hospital emergency room and walked through the excruciatingly painful experience of helping these two broken and stunned parents say goodbye to their little Lizzie. That moment in the ER began a multi-year journey of watching this couple navigate the storm of emotions and the resulting impact of this tragedy on them individually and on their marriage.

No one can tell another person how to grieve.



Grief is as unique as each individual in a relationship. We don't get to tell someone they are doing it wrong. There are healthy and unhealthy ways to grieve, but when someone is grieving differently than us, it doesn't mean they care less or are not as broken and devastated as we are. In relationships we partner with and companion each other on a painful journey, and we learn to allow each other to move at the pace appropriate to each other.

Beware of landmines along the journey.

Couples losing a child may experience emotions in their relationship of anger, judgment, resentment, blaming, frustration, and disconnection. The extreme emotional pain of the primary loss is exacerbated by the secondary losses revealed along the way and are accompanied by intense emotions devastating to a relationship. The weeks and months following the loss are critical for establishing principles and habits to guard the relationship against irreparable damage.

Grieve in sync with each other.

While the way you each grieve will be different, you can grieve in sync by making sure you create a habit of emotional connection communication. Couples initially drawn together by the impact of the loss may gradually drift apart without this intentional communication. Communication with an emotional connection is not about logistics, scheduling, planning meals or transportation. Neither is it limited to sitting down and just crying together. You have experienced communication with an emotional connection when you have been heard, and when what you have shared is valued and considered. It happens when your partner has opened a window to their soul and through their words and body language allowed you to see inside and know something personal about them.

Create a safe environment for emotional connection communication.

This type of communication needs to be at least but no more than 10-15 minutes a day, every day. It must be a priority, and must be free of distractions of technology, chores, or children. Imagine sitting on your couch, your carpeted floor, or at your table together face to face, eye level to eye level, and within close proximity to each other and sharing with each other what you are each experiencing. This is not conversation about fixing, problem-solving or suggesting. This time is for hearing, clarifying, valuing, affirming, and understanding. Feel free to bring up concerns but schedule another time to devote to solving a problem or hashing out a disagreement. This is time for syncing your relationship and realizing neither of you is the enemy. You are not alone and you have in your partner a precious treasure to accompany you on this grief journey you never asked to take.

A new normal for Billy and Suzy...

I am happy to share that Billy and Suzy's marriage survived their loss and they have a growing family. They will never forget their precious Lizzie and experience memories mixed with both gratitude for her and pain at the unrealized dream of her long and happy life. Their employers, church, family and friends



all pitched in to support this couple and while their journey has been at times unbearable, they are learning to adjust to their new normal.

