

## Women, men and grief

Women and men have learned to cope with grief in different ways and this can put additional strain on a relationship when a couple face bereavement. By understanding these differences, you can begin to achieve balance with your partner and within yourself, write counsellors Julia Samuel and Jenni Thomas OBE.

Grief is solitary. Even when other people are grieving, each person is ultimately alone. If you are in a couple, you may suddenly find it difficult to communicate with your partner, to express your feelings.

### A woman's grief

A woman's conditioning and upbringing mean her response to grief differs from a man's response. In particular, a mother's response to the loss of a child is likely to be different from a father's response. Women tend to be loss-oriented and are very much concerned with their feelings. They want to focus on their loss by remembering the person who has died. They have a need to express their emotions, to cry and to be sad.

### A man's grief

In contrast, men often want to return to normality as soon as possible. They want to look to the future, plan and move on. Traditionally parents in western society do not encourage males to express feelings; so men instinctively suppress them, try to be strong and to function as if nothing has happened. Their partner may misinterpret this behaviour as uncaring towards the person who has died.

When both of you engage in one of these types of response to the exclusion of the other type, there is potential for real misunderstanding.

Margaret Stroebe, a psychologist and internationally-acclaimed writer on bereavement has proposed a 'dual model of grieving' in which men and women learn to move between the two reactions and so understand that their partner's reaction is natural.

Women need help to start looking at the future - to move on from the intensity of the pain - and men need help so they can face up to and explore their painful feelings.

This model mirrors how we grieve as individuals. We move between focusing on the person who has died, our need to express our emotions and grieve - and our desire to find a respite from grieving and get on with living. When someone dies, the immediate response of the people who are left behind is to veer between saying, 'I feel like I'm going to die. The pain is so bad' and 'I mustn't let this overwhelm me, I must survive'. Children naturally shift between the two, moving in and out of their feelings with much more fluidity and speed than adults.

### Communication is the key

There is very little doubt that the key to a relationship successfully surviving the loss is to keep talking. This holds true whether only one of you is grieving, or both of you. It helps if you do not evaluate or judge what the other person is saying but instead try to see things through their eyes. In understanding and being understood, you can increase the depth of your relationship. When there is conflict, repeat what you

have understood your partner to say before you jump in with your opinion. It may seem mechanical, but this certainly helps unravel disagreements in a helpful rather than destructive way. Set aside time to talk to each other when you will not be disturbed. You do not need a huge amount of time, but create regular slots when you can listen to each other.

### **Getting physical**

Some couples seek comfort in getting close physically, either through making love or just holding each other. Others may find it hard to bear any physical contact at all. Difficulties can arise when your needs are different. Men may often try to show their love for their partner through sex. A woman may find this insensitive and insulting, especially after a baby or child has died and particularly if she fears a further pregnancy. This can lead to mutual rejection, with the woman holding all physical contact at bay for fear it might lead to sex. The couple can grow further and further apart as they become more isolated from and resentful towards each other.

### **No rules**

There are no rules about who should do what most effectively. Often the man handles the practical arrangements after the death. It may help to share roles so that neither of you feels overburdened. If you are happy defining distinct roles it can be helpful to spend time letting each other know what you are doing, how it felt and so on. When you are both grieving, it can be particularly difficult to find the emotional resources to help each other because you are tied up with just getting yourself through the day. Recognise this, try and be realistic with yourself and your partner. This is probably one of the most difficult events you will live through, and you cannot expect to 'pull together' or 'be closer' as much as you might hope or wish. Now is the time to seek out others who are close to you and to help yourself, which may sustain you enough to turn towards your partner.