

Professionally Speaking...

by Denise M. Paul MA, CT, CPLC

Stay In Your Own Grief Lane

We all know that men are very different than women. So why are we so surprised (and often disappointed) when fathers grieve differently than mothers when their baby dies? There are two possible reasons. Men are often raised from childhood to be brave and not cry, and when they grow up this message translates into being strong and unemotional. Hence, they try to shelter their wives from what they believe to be a weakness. The other reason is because it is the mother who carries the baby. It is she who experiences all of the physical and hormonal changes in her body. While the mother has the privilege of nurturing the baby inside her body, she also bears the burden and feels the responsibility when something goes wrong. Society seldom gives men the opportunity to mourn. They are expected to go back to work quickly where everyone inquires about how their wives are doing, often forgetting that it was their baby who died too!

When it comes to grieving your loss, there are two styles of mourning, and it is helpful to understand that there is no right or wrong way to mourn. In an article that I wrote a few years ago I called them Instrumental and Intuitive styles, which are terms used by grief professionals. Recently, I learned an easier way to understand and label the differences. There are Activity-Oriented and Emotional-Oriented mourners. At the risk of stereotyping, I have found that men are usually the Activity-Oriented mourners, while women are usually the Emotional-Oriented type. This means that men often seek physical activities to work through their grief. They go back to work, they exercise, they work in the yard, etc. Women are often consumed with thinking about their baby and wanting to feel the pain of the loss. They want to talk about every detail of their baby's life inside the womb and the circumstances surrounding their death. When a baby dies before birth there are so few memories to talk about, but every one of them is cherished. A mother's body is aching to hold her baby and her heart is broken. She needs to cry.

This disparity in mourning styles very often puts a wedge between couples, mostly because the mother doesn't think that the father is grieving enough. She assumes that her husband or partner is not as sad as she is, which translates (in her mind) into her believing that he does not love the baby as much as she does, and that he is not as sad as she is. It is not the death of the baby that causes problems in a marriage, it is the judgment of each other's grief that causes the problems. We all grieve differently and

just because you lost the same baby, it does not mean that you will grieve the same way.

Let me explain the difference between grieving and mourning, although we all tend to use the two words interchangeably. Grief is the sadness that you feel on the inside, and mourning is what you do on the outside to show that you are processing your grief. If you grieve but don't mourn you will hold all of your feelings in and you will have a very difficult time on your grief journey. Some ways that you can mourn include: talking about your baby, going to the cemetery, doing activities in memory of your baby, attending support groups, setting up a memorial garden, keeping a grief journal, or wearing a piece of jewelry in memory of your baby.

It is important for mothers and fathers to mourn authentically. I urge you to concentrate on your own feelings. Mourn in a way that feels right for you, rather than judging each other for not mourning appropriately or enough. It is usually the husband that is accused of not being sad enough. Mothers don't know what their spouse is feeling on the inside. He may be crying in the shower or splitting wood in the yard to physically release his painful feelings, while trying to be strong for you. Women should not assume that their husbands are not grieving. They are just doing it differently.

You cannot live well or love well, unless you grieve well.

Stay in your own grief lane. Try to avoid judging how your spouse is grieving. You may be driving on the same road, but you are in separate cars, in separate lanes, and going at your own pace. Keep your eyes ahead and spend your energy tending to your own grief. Try not to worry about being judged by your spouse or your family and friends. Do what you need to do. If you need support from others, then choose people who will ride along side of you. Avoid people who are driving in the lane behind you, bumping their car into you to hurry you along. Find people who will ride in the passenger seat of your car. Find people who will listen to you, no matter how many times you want to talk about your baby. Find people who will cry with you when you need to cry, and find people who will laugh with you and understand that just because you are laughing, it doesn't mean that you are "over your grief."

I encourage mothers and fathers to find other grief support individuals. You cannot be each other's grief counselor. It is especially helpful to find someone who has had a similar loss because you can usually be assured that they understand what you are going through. Attend Perinatal Loss Support Groups, such as UNITE, Inc. in the Philadelphia area, where you can share with other parents who are on the same grief

path as you. Stay in your own grief lane on this journey. Mothers and fathers, the destination is the same for both of you. Your goal is to integrate your baby's death into your lives in a meaningful way, while gradually reinvesting your time and energy into new hopes and dreams for your future together, while still remembering and honoring your baby.