



LANDSFORENINGEN
UVENTET BARNEDØD

Relationships and grieving after the loss of a child





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Inge Steenslands
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Introduction

Most couples who lose a child find that for some time after the death, life together can be more difficult than before. Many experience a strong sense of vulnerability and find that they have less strength and stamina than previously. Each person who forms part of that couple often experiences grieving differently. A person may grieve so differently from his or her partner that communication, contact, intimacy and sexuality become difficult. If this leads to conflict, living together as a couple can become difficult.

Relationships and grieving after the loss of a child is one in a series of information brochures dealing with grief, published by the Norwegian SIDS and Stillbirth Society [Landsforeningen uventet barnedød, LUB] (for a list of references, see the last page of this brochure). This brochure takes as its point of departure that grief is a great strain, not only for each parent, individually, but also as a couple. Experiencing grief is painful and difficult for everyone. When both people in a relationship grieve over having lost their child, they may derive strength and support because they are two people. However, this can also be a big challenge. Many people experience grief as a situation where they lose control over their lives. Their thoughts and feelings can be more intense, and can vary a lot more than before. Parents stricken by grief must accept this and meet the challenges they face. People in a relationship must also learn to tolerate and overcome the differences that may arise from having different ways of grieving.

The purpose of this brochure is to provide information as to how the loss of a child can affect a couple's relationship. During a difficult time grief and longing take center stage. Experiencing different reactions can become the foundation for conflict in relationships. It is therefore important that parents who experience the loss of a child, be informed about how grief can be experienced and can express itself, and what grief can entail for each individual and for a couple. There are a wide variety of ways in which grief can be experienced and expressed, and these variations do not always fall into typical gender patterns. The more a couple knows about typical differences between men and women's ways of grieving, and also the challenges that grieving presents for them, the better they will be able to understand what is happening and to learn to take control of their own grieving process.

What is grief?

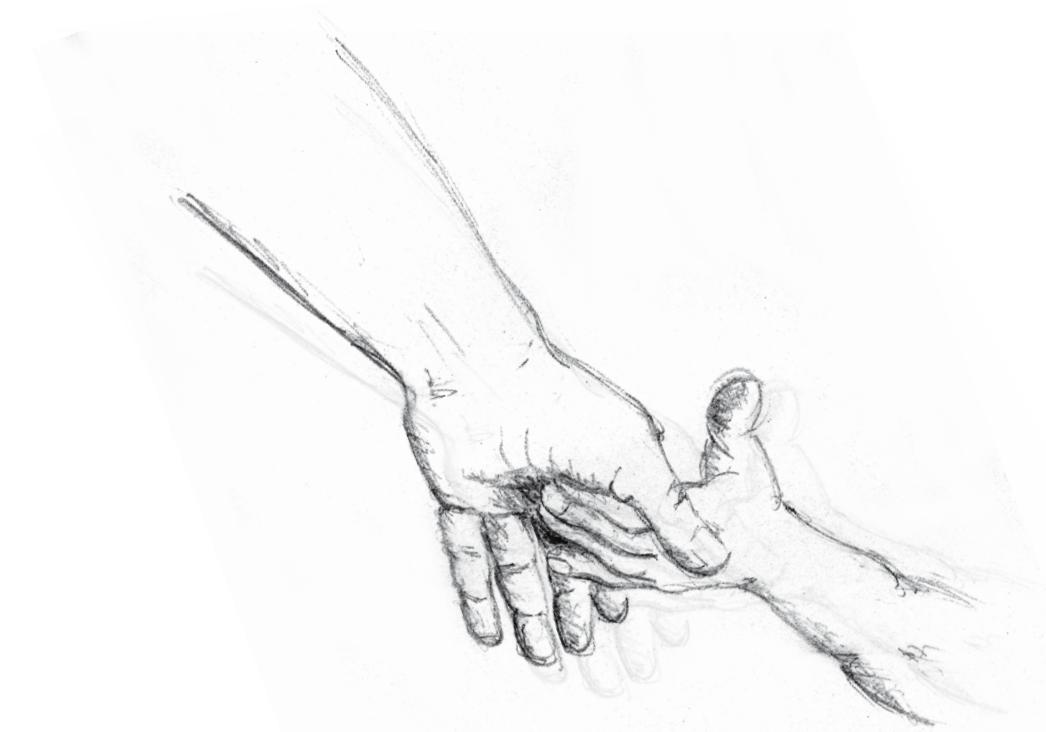
Grief is the term used to define the reactions people can experience after the loss of someone with whom they were close. In this brochure the term, grief, describes all the different ways that the loss of a child affects each individual parent and the relationship with their partner.

This includes:

- the individual's experiences and expressed thoughts, feelings, physical reactions and actions
- the changes that occur in communication and interaction within the couple affected, and
- the couple's attempts at coping with the situation in which they find themselves, both individually and together.

Experiencing such a loss includes both stress and challenges, with which those affected must try to cope and endure. This requires making an effort over a long period of time, and we call this working through grief. When we focus our attention on a couple's relationship, we must also consider the grief that couples must work through together. This process also includes grieving that is not necessarily limited to one's own reactions, or even one's partner's reactions, but includes pressures and challenges that the relationship will endure during the grieving process. These challenges often have their roots in the simple fact that partners react differently and have different needs.

As a starting point, grief can be viewed as the difference between what should have been, on the one hand; all the hopes, plans and wishes that parents had for their child; and on the other hand, the brutal reality that crushed these expectations. Grief focuses our attention on the child that is gone. Many of the expectations for the child will have been developed by the parents together, and therefore they have a somewhat shared understanding of "what should have been". However, each of the parents also has his or her own personal thoughts and feelings regarding what the child could have become, and would have meant to them, personally. They will already have formed images of their hopes for the child. Some of these will be shared with their partner, while others will be completely personal, and perhaps different from their partner's images. Each parent may not have given too much consideration to these thoughts before, but these thoughts and hopes can become extremely important after the child's death. It can be a great challenge to develop openness and tolerance for the differences that may emerge during this period. Not all attempts at overcoming grief's challenges necessarily lead to a good solution, either. Even with great effort, parents can find themselves "running out of steam" or "going round in circles" in their attempts at creating meaning, redeeming hope for the future, and re-establishing confidence and stability in their own lives and in their relationship. The ability parents have expressing their thoughts, feelings and other reactions, and their being able to speak freely together about the situation will be decisive in coping with grief.



What is so special about losing a child

Losing a child means something different than losing an adult. When an adult dies, it means losing a relationship that may have developed over a long period of time. The relationship is established, and one knows that person. Losing a child means losing a relationship that is still in a developmental phase. Therefore, parents do not just simply lose their child and their relationship to them when death occurs. They also lose the person their child would become, and the meaning their child would bring to their own lives, when the child was young, later on in life, and perhaps even as an adult. The child, and the parent's relationship to the child, is therefore an important part of the parents themselves. One's own identity and perception

of the meaning of life can be deeply associated with the child, and this can be badly shaken when a child dies. Losing a child can therefore be compared to having a limb amputated; parents lose a part of themselves that can never be replaced.

Precisely because children do undergo growth and development, many parents find that they lose their child in new ways for a long time after the child's death. For example, they may come to experience loss, when they see other children on their first day at school. Again, they may feel the loss of their child as a teenager, when another youth celebrates his or her confirmation, or as a bride or bridegroom when someone else gets married, and even

as a parent when attending the christening of some other proud, new parents. Hence, family occasions and other special days can cause feelings of grief surfacing again, because one becomes more conscious of the child that has been lost.

Guilt, blaming oneself, and feelings of inadequacy are normal after all kinds of loss. However, parents who lose a child can experience these emotions especially intensely, because they feel they have failed in their responsibility as the child's protectors. Losing a child is also particularly hard because it seems "unnatural" in the cycle of life. A child dying is contrary to what we consider to be life's natural order; children should not die before their parents. Hence, a child's death challenges the parent's most basic and primary expectations of life.

Why do we experience grief differently?

The grieving process is very personal and is influenced by many factors. These include the specific experience of losing the child, what the child meant to the individual, and the parent's previous experiences with loss, the parent's personality, and his or her ability to cope. Also, the circumstances in which the couple finds itself after the death will be a factor. Furthermore, the experience of loss is strongly linked to how the death occurred. Was it expected, or did it happen suddenly? Did it occur during pregnancy or after having lived for a while after birth? Were the parents present at the time? Were they inactive or actively involved in the situation, in other words, were they in some way involved in what happened?

If death occurred suddenly, unexpectedly and dramatically while the parents were present, then a great deal

of additional strain can be created, in addition to the loss itself. This complicates the grieving process. If for example, the death occurred in a car accident in which the parents were involved, and they did not manage to save the child; or if they themselves were driving, then the experience of losing the child can also be closely associated with the event itself. This can generate feelings of losing control, powerlessness at having failed their child, and feelings of guilt about what happened. If events like these are linked to the child's death, then parents also have to deal with intense images and difficult emotions, in addition to coping with the loss itself. As a result, working through one's grief can become especially difficult.

Experiencing loss is influenced by the relationship the parents had with the child, as well. What kind of expectations and hopes did they have for the child? How simple or complicated was this relationship? If the death occurred during pregnancy or birth, many women, in particular, may suffer from feelings of guilt and shame. Mothers often place the blame for the death on themselves, feeling that they have failed in their responsibility as the child's protector, and as a consequence makes the mother (and father) feel ashamed. Also, some women feel shame, that they were unable to give birth to a living child, and this can make them feel like they are only "half a person" (1).

The expectant mother and father will have had different relationships with their unborn child, and this can have major consequences regarding how they then react when the child dies. Different experiences and reactions between parents can cause problems in their understanding and accepting each other. Often, mothers will have formed a closer bond with the child because they have gone through

pregnancy. On the other hand, fathers may feel more distant. Other people may not ascribe a strong identity to the child. This fact can also make the experience of loss all the more difficult, because parents may have to defend their reactions to the people with whom they are in close social contact; something which can be exhausting.

If the child has lived for a while, then there will be various other factors that may affect the experience of loss and grief. For example, if the relationship with the child was cold or was affected by unresolved conflicts, then the grieving process can be especially difficult. While many mothers can form close bonds with their very young child quite early, many fathers establish a similar relationship at a later stage. This difference can be a reason why parents experience their loss and grief differently, and why communication between parents can become more challenging.

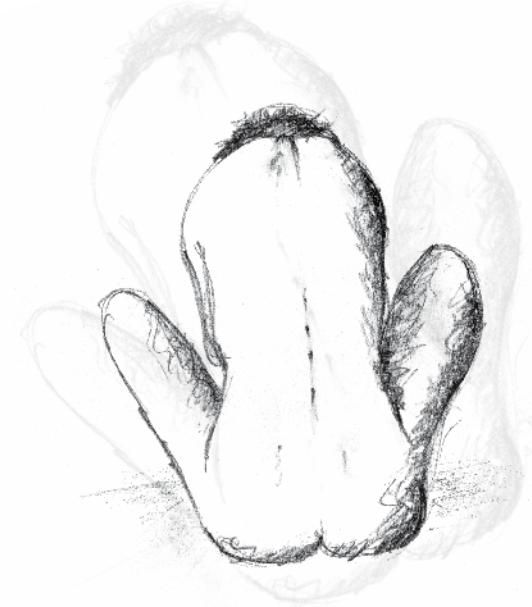
Prior experience of loss and grief can also play a major role in how well parents are able to cope with situations like this. If they have already experienced the loss of someone they were close to, before, and this grief has not been fully worked through, then the old grief can also resurface. Despair and a loss of power may become quite strong. Consequently, they may attempt to avoid acknowledging the grief. However, those that managed to face up to a prior loss may feel more willing and able to face up to their new grief.

Another important factor in the grieving process and after the death, is whether parents have other children to take care of. Grief and crisis situations demand a great deal of attention from both adults and children. It can feel very difficult to "be there" for, and to support other children,

especially when one is suffering from a lack of energy and feeling drained. At the same time, parents have stated that their other children provided them with the drive they needed to cope with the loss. Children need attention. It becomes necessary and important that everyday routines are reestablished. Therefore, the needs of the other children in the family can give parents a reason to get up in the morning, and provide parents with inspiration, so that they still have something meaningful and worthwhile to live for.

Parent's own personalities, their way of relating to other people, and of relating to close and painful experiences, will often vary. Some people are open and express their innermost thoughts and feelings, while others are more guarded. Some have an optimistic view of life, while others are more pessimistic. This can have a major influence on how they experience their grief. Parent's ages, lifestyles, religious beliefs, and whether they have other children, will also influence how they think, and therefore react to the loss of their child. Care and support from friends, family, neighbors and work colleagues can also play a role in allowing a person the possibility of working through his or her grief.

Parents can have very different experiences in all of these areas, and are therefore likely to have different points of departure for their own grieving process. This influences both the conditions needed, and the energy required, to understand their partner's grief, and the possibilities they have for handling the challenges that they will face together, as a couple.



Grieving takes time

Most parents affected by the loss of a child will discover the fact that grieving takes time. Many experience a strong sense of grief for a long, long time, and also far beyond when most other people expect them to be "over it". As a result, they can develop feelings of isolation and loneliness because they do not manage to live up to other people's expectations. Since the grieving process takes such a long time, the manner in which grief is experienced and expressed will come to vary as time passes.

During the first period of time after the death, in the days leading up to the funeral, most parents will find that their situation is chaotic and confusing. The unthinkable has happened. Everything is new. They must concentrate on tasks for which they are unprepared. Many couples find that during this time, they more or less share their experience of grief. They may discover that the experience

has created a closer bond, and that in many ways they now have similar reactions to what is happening. They may find that they get considerable comfort and support from each other's reactions. During this period, grieving reactions are largely associated with what occurred and how it happened. Questions surface that both parents will often wish to discuss, upon which they may find it easy to agree. Later on in the grieving process, parents may find that they develop varying needs regarding discussion of what has happened. Thoughts, feelings and experiences become more personal. Therefore, it can become more difficult to fulfill each other's needs.

It is most likely that grieving takes much longer than both those suffering grief and other people may have anticipated. People suffering grief may become anxious about exhausting their friends and family with a constant and recurring preoccupation with the child they lost, and with



thoughts and feelings connected to that loss. Other people often expect that parents return to their "normal" life much sooner than actually feels natural for the parents. This in turn creates unfortunate expectations. As a result, grieving parents and others may experience a strain on their relationships. It can be very painful when other people do not understand that grieving over one's child makes it impossible to get on with one's life, in the way that other people expect. Some feel that they need to "live up to" perceived expectations, which they may find exhausting. Others experience contact with people who have supported them as becoming very difficult. In the worst cases, relationships can be broken off, which can be experienced as yet another loss.

My grief, your grief, and our grief

Couples who lose a child do not only have their own grief to deal with, they also have each other's grief to tackle. While experiencing possibly the greatest crisis in one's own life, one must also deal with one's partner, who is probably also experiencing the greatest crisis in his or her life. Additionally, challenges arise with regard to the couple's relationship when partners grieve differently from each other. It can also be hard to understand a partner's reactions, or sometimes an apparent lack of any reactions.

Grieving itself is hard work. Many people find that it consumes all of their energy. While the need to concentrate on working through one's own grief grows, there is an increasing need to recognize and show understanding for the grieving of one's partner. Perhaps, for long periods

of time, coping with one's self is sufficient. It may seem important not to place more of a strain on your partner by imposing on him or her one's own thoughts and reactions. Hence, there is a possibility that differences in how each person expresses him or herself may sometimes be misinterpreted. It may even lead to a growing silence and distance in the couple's relationship, especially regarding certain topics and situations. Unfortunately, this can then develop into areas of conflict within the relationship.

In this context, we can consider grief as: my grief, your grief, and our grief. Most people working through their grief discover that their concern swings between their own grief, their partner's grief, and their shared grief. During periods of the grieving process, both parents will be occupied with common and shared experiences in their grief and in their longing. They are united in their efforts to cope. At other times, they will be preoccupied with handling their own grief, or dealing with their partner's grief. The challenge lies in communication and a proper balance between these needs.

Granted, parents may react differently from each other. However, they may also react differently from the manner in which their partner expects or needs. Grief may then strain communication within a relationship. A Norwegian study of intimacy and sexuality after the death of a child [Nærhet og seksualitet etter et barns dødsfall], indicates that despite (or perhaps because of) how differently grief and loss can be experienced, most couples feel that they actually become closer to each other. One fifth of the couples studied feel that their relationship is the same as before, and only ten percent feel that they have moved further apart (2).

Differences in men and women

Many studies have shown that there are major differences between men and women, in the way that they experience and deal with grief. This relates to how feelings are expressed, what occupies their thoughts, and how they act to cope with their grief. Generally, women experience more intense and lasting emotional grief than men. Compared to men, women experience more anxiety and depression, feel more sadness, have many painful thoughts, and they struggle more often with physical problems and sleep disruption (3, 4, 5). Women have a greater tendency than men to express themselves and to talk about their thoughts and feelings, and also to read or write about their grief (6).

Studies show that after the loss of a child, men cope with their feelings differently from women (7). Many men only cry when they are alone, or are with their partner, and tend to hold their feelings back when they meet other people (8, 9). Some men say that they can cry inside, without tears or outward forms of expression. Generally, a man might need to tell others about what has happened, but would not express how he feels about it. Men that can open up and discuss their feelings often do so only with one close friend, or perhaps a very few close friends. Women, however, may have many people with whom they share their thoughts and feelings.

Men also show a greater tendency than women to involve themselves in work or other physical activities. During the period right after the death, many men take on the responsibility of ensuring that the economic and every day tasks continue to function normally, so that their partner has the freedom to grieve in her own way. Compared to



women, men seem more able to hide their own feelings by involving themselves in other things. More men are often eager to find information and solutions to their new situation. Typically, men seek concrete advice as to what they should do, while women increasingly want someone who will listen to them. It seems that women generally can express themselves more directly and work through their grief. Women tend to articulate what they think and feel, while men will more frequently express their grief through activities and actions. Men are also more likely than women to deal with their feelings alone, without sharing their emotions with others.

Also, studies show that in comparison with women, men are more likely to increase their alcohol consumption after losing a child (10). Alcohol can become a vehicle for numbing pain and stress. Women are more likely to use medication instead of alcohol, in order to reduce anxiety and to sleep better.

Typical gender roles

When comparing groups of men and women and their different experiences and ways of expressing grief, differences stated here are typical of gender roles. The reader should note that this is an oversimplification and is not considered to hold true for every man or woman. Some men do deal with their grief in a way that follows a pattern more typical of women; also some women may handle their grief in a way that is more typical of men. Also, most studies of gender differences have focused on heterosexual men and women. Amongst lesbian and homosexual couples, similar differences can be identified without being linked to an individual's biological sex.

After a while, it is normal for parents to adopt roles in relation to each other. This can follow the typical patterns indicated here, but may well differ. Some couples may even find that they completely reverse these roles, while others may switch between different roles during the course of the grieving process. Grief is likely to vary, It may be deep and intense for some periods, and be less so at other times. Often, a couple will adjust their roles so that one can comfort the other, for example when they are crying. Over time, the couple can learn to mutually balance their relationship with each other. This is often explained as a way of protecting themselves against the unpredictable chaos and helplessness that would result if both acted independently from each other (11). Some women have stated that it was only when their men "broke down" and were no longer so "strong", that the women discovered their own strength. They uncovered strength that they never knew they possessed. For them it was a positive experience to be able to support their partner, and also to comprehend that he need not always be the "strong" one. Also, men discovered that it can be beneficial to release a little responsibility to someone else, and to express their own reactions, powerlessness and despair, as well.

Grief and relationships

Norwegian research on bereaved couples, mentioned above, shows that in general, couples do tend to share a view of reality, when it comes to their grief and their relationship (2). Most state that they are happy in their relationship, and they agree that they can speak about their feelings to each other. Most are happy with the support they receive from their partner. Mothers and fathers both agree that it was probably the mother who suffered most intensely, and for the longest time after the

death. They also agree that fathers usually assume responsibility for looking after their partner during the time after a child's death. There are, however, some subtle distinctions. Mothers do feel themselves less understood by their partner, than fathers do. Also, fathers are more likely to assume that there are typical gender differences as regards the intensity and duration of grief.

Some men have stated that they believe women to be better at verbalizing their feelings, their expectations, and their pain. Some men, as well as some women, do feel that the man's role in a partnership is especially problematic when it comes to expressing strong emotions. Such individual differences are often considered to be the typical ways in which men and women are expected to relate to their feelings. This kind of generalization may lead to all kinds of misunderstandings and contradictions. Men can be blamed for not grieving enough, not seeming to be bothered about the loss of their child, to be more interested in other things, and not understanding their partner. Women can also be blamed for dwelling on their thoughts and feelings, talking about them "the whole time", incessantly, and showing no interest in finding solutions to problems.

Traditionally, the mother is most often the focal point when a child dies. Perhaps, this is also more likely in cases when the child is young, or dies during pregnancy. When an older child dies, attention may be more equally focused on the father and mother. However, in our society it is more common to assume that grieving is something that women do. Women are often at the center stage in grieving processes. Also, a woman's way of grieving may be considered the "correct" way of grieving, while a man's way of expressing and processing grief can be viewed as

wrong or somehow lacking. A man may sometimes be demoted to the role of a helpless assistant, leaving the woman to do the crying and the talking. Often, a man will find solutions to his own, his partner's, and the family's problems, alone and in silence. Probably, society and other people also reinforce the assumption that it is the woman who is the primary person experiencing grief. Most men who have lost a child discover that others only show an interest in the women, the mothers, without remembering that men or fathers must also deal with grief. Many men are greeted with concern in the form of: "How is your wife doing? Please convey our condolences". This may occur without people even questioning how the man himself is doing.

Couples who experience and express their grief differently, are likely to face challenges regarding communication, shared understanding, and the intimacy inherent in their relationship. They may feel lonely and powerless. When both partners need support, but no one has the resources to give it. Silence and distance may develop between them. Thus, it is important to recognize that differences are entirely normal and are a part of the process with which a couple must cope.

The above-mentioned Norwegian research (2) shows that where couples whose relationship broke up, 60 percent related the separation with the fact that they had lost a child. The reasons given by couples were: having different reactions, grieving out of sync, lack of communication, and little support or care from their partner. This being the case, it is also important to recognize that these are issues that are normal amongst couples who do stay together, and they need to be dealt with in any event.



It is a common perception that losing a child increases the risk of a family break-up. In fact, this is not correct. Research shows that after the loss of a child, divorces occur no more often than normally. Norwegian research indicates that, in fact, most couples do become closer. To have experienced such a tragedy together can create a unique bond; some couples have described it as feeling like a kind of shared fate (2).

What does become very clear from many studies (9) is how important it can be for couples to talk to each other and to communicate their thoughts and feelings. A significant factor in overcoming the difficult period after the loss of a child, has proven to be that couples take the time to talk and to create opportunities for common activities and experiences. Also, it is important that partners respect and recognize the fact that their partner may experience different reactions.

Sexuality

Sex is a key element in a couple's relationship. After losing a child, many couples experience difficulty with this aspect of their relationship. Yet, there are few couples who have lost a child, where those providing support address issues associated with the couple's sex life. Additionally, almost no one discusses this issue with friends or family. However, it is important that grieving couples are provided with guidance and get the chance to talk about problems with their sex lives. Not only will they be better prepared for what can happen, they will also be able to accept their situation more readily. This kind of support can help reverse negative thought processes. Instead of thinking: "now, I have a sexual problem on top of an already stressful situation", the couple may understand that "we have just reached a point in the grieving process that lots of people have trouble tackling."

Numerous people have said that thinking about sex was totally out of the question during the initial stage after the loss of their child. For many, this period feels unreal and is characterized by a kind of numbness, but where it can feel important to hug and hold or be held by one's partner. Other people may react by withdrawing, in order to be alone. The above-mentioned research on intimacy and sexuality after the death of a child (2) shows that ten percent of the couples resumed sexual contact again, soon after the death, and 66 percent did so during the first three months afterwards. Results also indicate that for a long time after their loss, around a third of the couples experienced reduced sexual activity and reduced enjoyment linked to their sex lives.

Regarding the question of when it is natural to resume their sexual relationship, many find that their partner's wishes and expectations do not match their own. Still, some couples do manage to connect with each other sexually and find a kind of strength in that, which in turn helps them to live with their grief and pain, and to face everyday life. Physical contact and intimacy can comfort a person, reduce stress, and provide an outlet for grief. Others will spend more time hugging and caressing their partner than previously, without the need to follow this up with sexual intercourse. Yet, many people may feel that intimacy at this point in time could make life too complicated, and this may also be the case for a sexual relationship. There may be many reasons why a partner would not feel ready for sex. If the child died around the time of the pregnancy, shortly before or shortly after the birth, then many women will still experience hormonal swings. They may feel they need to get to know their bodies again, "to get their bodies back in order", before they can think of using their bodies for sex, again. Also,

some women believe that the parts of their body associated with birth, are now associated with death. Therefore, sex can be negative and a reminder that their child has died. For women who think like this, it may take some time before they can consider their sexual organs in a positive light, especially as something that can provide joy and pleasure.

Some will find their partner's sexual advances provocative. They may consider it unthinkable to think about sex in the midst of a situation where grief dominates one's focus and energy. When days have been full of tears and sorrow, a person can be totally exhausted by evening. A partner's sexual advances can also be interpreted as a signal that they are not grieving enough, or that they do not love the lost child enough. Some think sexual advances may be inappropriate behavior, comparable to other entertainment, like movies or partying. Still others can experience the loss of their child, as if their own lives have ended. The desire to be with their dead child, wherever the child may be now, can make it impossible to think about something as life-affirming as sex.

Often, the lack of knowledge and understanding of a partner's manner of grieving, becomes a source mutual irritation and communication can be difficult. An attempt at bridging the gap and making contact with one's partner through sexual advances, may sometimes lead to a widening of the existing gap. It can be difficult to interpret what might actually be an attempt at improving communication. Understanding the motivation behind sexual advances requires good instincts, especially when one is already under so much pressure and stress.

There are many aspects of sexuality, such as: lust, horniness, flirting, playfulness, joy, love, intimacy, physical contact, giving and receiving pleasure, and confirmation that one is attractive. Expressing sexuality in one form or another may be motivated by a wish to be close and caring, to provide comfort, and to seek an escape from one's vulnerability and despair. It may also include an element of aggression, violence, power, and/ or powerlessness.



Sex can be justified as a wish to escape to a safe haven: to be held, to fill the void, and also to reflect the need to relieve stress or tension. For some people, crying and receiving comfort may fulfill much of the above-mentioned needs. However, it may not feel natural for others to cry. Therefore, sex may be the only way of creating this kind of closeness.

Sex may have been associated with positive, reassuring and good feelings before the loss of the child. However, the reason why sex is desired may change. Lust and desire can change into a need to escape and to release stress. Yet, the act of sex can also be an act of desperation. For some people it can be the only time that they connect with their deeper feelings of despair. Sex can be an experience where every nerve in one's body is utterly tense to the point of bursting. Sexual orgasm can thus provide a long overdue release of tension. Both phenomena: bringing one's body to its breaking point, and feeling exhausted from crying or reliving painful thoughts, are well known expressions of grief, though on the surface they appear to be very different.

Misunderstandings can easily arise, especially if sexual advances are assumed to be connected with lust, joy, playfulness, or pleasure. Compared with a couple's previous experiences, sex must be perceived from a completely new standpoint, and be associated with new and different needs. The question arises: is one partner in a position to accept the other partner's way of expressing grief, especially when it can be so different from one's own way of reacting, or different from one's expectations of how grief should be expressed.

Finding one another in grief

If couples are not informed that grief will influence their sex life, then when problems do arise, they might perceive this as an additional problem on top of everything else. As such, this could move them toward a separation. Since sexuality is a topic that is rarely discussed, many feel that they are left alone to deal with these difficulties. Information on this subject can provide people with knowledge and insight. It can make it easier for people to understand each other, to accept each other's differences, and to help to cope with grief and deal with one's sex life. Even though for some people sex may be an outlet for stress and grief, this certainly does not mean that a partner should feel pressured into having sex, if he or she does not want sex, or feels unable to have sex yet. Sex should not occur before a couple feels ready for it. However, if a couple possesses the knowledge that it is normal for grief to influence one's sex life, then, they are also in a better position to understand a partner's and one's own behavior.

Many couples would benefit from being able to talk to someone who they trust and who is external to their relationship as a couple. If matters do become too difficult over time, then couples should seek professional help. Most couples find that what is crucial to improving their situation and their relationship is good interaction and communication, and caring for each other. If a couple finds that sex becomes difficult and a wall of silence develops around the subject, then it can be particularly hard to speak openly about this topic later. Therefore, it is important to maintain open lines of communication regarding sex. Discussion and reflection on the following questions may prove helpful:

- How would you compare your sexuality now, with what it was before you lost your child?
- What has changed?
- What do you think is the reason for this?
- How would you like your sex life to function?
- What do you think needs to be done, in order to make it the way you would like it to be?
- What can you do to help make it that way?
- What do you think your partner can do?
- Is being on the same wavelength a requirement for a good sex life, or can sexuality compensate for a lack of being mentally close?
- If it is the actual act of sexual intercourse that is difficult, are there alternative solutions?
Can you establish a set of deadlines and an interval you may call "free space", that would be a period of time without sexual intercourse?

If their sex life has become restricted, then perhaps a couple can find alternative solutions. For example, a couple could define a period of sex without intercourse, which included physical intimacy and exploration of one's own and one's partner's body. Some people need to re-establish an awareness of themselves and their partner. It may be easier to accept a situation where one's sexuality is put on hold, when one recognizes that this is a normal part of the grieving process, and that the situation will change with time. A couple must recognize that they are allowed to enjoy what they can, even if they are sad deep down inside. Crying and laughter can go hand in hand. People can be lovers whilst in the middle of grieving; it is permissible.

A new pregnancy?

After losing a small child, many people react by wanting to become pregnant again, as soon as possible. They may feel this is the only way to fill the void that they are experiencing, since their child died. It is not unusual for the motive to be a subconscious desire to turn back the clock to a time before their child died. Also, a reaction like this can potentially create a good deal of conflict, should partners disagree on when to try to become pregnant, or disagree on whether they dare try. There are many reasons for not getting pregnant again: fear that things will go wrong again, worrying that a partner might not be able to cope with the possibility of grieving, should there be another loss, fear that the relationship might not withstand another crisis if things go wrong again, and showing consideration for any other children who are already a part of the family. Many find it daunting to view the prospect of a new pregnancy and the anxiety that it brings, whilst in the midst of grieving. Disagreements surrounding a new pregnancy may also affect a couple's sex lives and their ability to communicate. If the couple disagrees on when to try again, it can be useful to gather up information on the thoughts and experiences of other parents who have been through a similar situation, and find out what they chose to do. This can help a couple to avoid making a decision purely out of desperation. Parents have different experiences in this respect. No one can tell you exactly what is the right thing to do. Some couples are convinced that for them it was right to wait to initiate a new pregnancy. Others may have wanted a new child so badly, and then found comfort in their decision to try. Speaking to healthcare professionals and / or other parents that have lost a child and have been through another pregnancy, can provide couples with some perspective,

and can help them arrive at an informed decision (12). Either way, a new pregnancy is a period of emotional strain for most couples, precisely because one is anxious that something could go wrong again, and the couple has experienced the consequences of this in the past.

When a new pregnancy is not possible

Sadly, not everyone has a choice as to if and when they can get pregnant again. There are a variety of reasons why someone might not be able to have more children. This can often become as an additional and significant strain that can in turn complicate one's grief. While grieving and feeling pain for the child that has been lost, a person must also try and become reconciled with the fact she may never have another child, either. This can greatly intensify one's grief. Losing a child will often strengthen a person's desire to have a new child. If someone has experienced losing a child, or having had children before, then she recognizes more clearly what life will be without a child. Because having children is often such a basic need, many people who cannot have another child become devastated and proceed to perceive that their life has lost meaning without the possibility of having children. It seems that it is easier to accept not being able to have children, if one has not already lost a child. It can be a major struggle to come to terms with life's injustices, when one can no longer have children. A person needs time and energy to cope with this, before being able to recover sufficiently to normal, everyday life, again.

What do grieving couples need?

Parents who lose a child need to be informed of and to understand various ways in which grief can be experienced. There are major differences between different reactions as well as the timing of these during

the grieving process. There is some truth to the typical gender differences associated with how men and women grieve and deal with their loss. However, it is also true that there are plenty of men and women who do not fit these typical "feminine" and "masculine" moulds. Grieving couples need to be informed about the normal problems that can crop up in a relationship, regarding communication, closeness, and sexuality. This can be important in helping them to cope with the stresses of grief and to find solutions to the challenges they face after losing a child. Parents who lose a child should receive both written and verbal information regarding how men and women process grieving, and how this can affect their family life, intimacy, and sexuality (2). This should take place within two weeks after the death, but not before the first stage of shock is over (6). Moreover, they should be offered follow-up counseling with a qualified healthcare professional, or with someone else who is qualified to advise bereaved parents. This session should provide both medical and other professional information, but also to try and establish what the couple needs in terms of bereavement support in the long term. Many people require a long time to understand and accept what has happened, so a good discussion is important in helping the bereaved on their way.

The first meeting parents have with healthcare or support professionals after losing their child, is usually affected by their emotional upheaval. Shock and a sense of the unreal can affect one's concentration. Not many people are capable of knowing what they should ask, and it is unlikely that more than a few partial bits of information even register. Many will turn down the offer of additional follow-up, as they will not have the foresight to know what they will need later. Then, many may find it difficult

to ask for help which they have previously rejected; and later on, they may also lack the energy to take initiative and ask for assistance. It is therefore important that the people they encounter have an understanding of what the couple most likely will require, and that offers of further contact are followed up later, because the need for support can change over time. Even if a couple declines having a new meeting, it is still possible to offer them a follow-up telephone conversation. If so, it is useful to try establishing when this call should take place. Written information should also be provided as to how the couple can get further help from professionals, as well as support from other couples who may have had similar experiences.

Support from others with similar experiences

Many parents have expressed the need to come into contact with other parents who have been through a similar situation. This can happen through volunteer organizations such as the Norwegian SIDS and Stillbirth Society [Landsforeningen uventet barnedød, LUB], or through public agencies involved in providing support in the form of group meetings. Several organizations for affected parents provide a network of people who have experienced losing a child themselves and can be contacted for support.

Many parents who have lost a child benefit significantly from talking with other couples who find themselves in a similar situation. It can be good to talk to someone who understands, without needing to explain or justify everything. It can also be a good experience to recognize oneself in other people's descriptions and to get confirmation that "one's feelings are normal". It is often useful

to see that others may struggle with the same problems. It is useful to have the opportunity to speak about and to discuss these problems repeatedly, about the different aspects of grieving, and about the new circumstances that proceed to affect one's life. It is healthy to be able to tell one's own story, question how this all could have happened, and share one's thoughts, feelings and reactions with others who have similar experiences.

As time goes by, it may often become difficult for friends and family close to the grieving couple to continue to listen, during the long grieving process. People may often find that they are not in a position to help the bereaved, in their effort to move forward. A contact person or a bereavement support group [sorggruppe] from the Norwegian SIDS and Stillbirth Society (LUB), may be able to provide support. It may deal with the needs of affected parents who wish to talk about their grief, even long after others might think that the parents should have overcome their loss. Some people may regard support groups as being very sad phenomenon. Nevertheless, many people find comfort in such groups. A support group may even be a place where one finds humor, again! It can be liberating to be able to laugh in the midst of grief. It is a place where a participant need not feel guilty or afraid of being misunderstood, as not grieving enough. A support group might be lead by healthcare professionals. It can be lead or co-lead by people who have lost a child themselves and who have, in addition, completed a course in bereavement counselling.

How can couples in grief get help?

In addition to healthcare services, the Norwegian directorate for children, youth and family affairs, and religious communities, there are also several volunteer organizations that can provide help and support to parents that have lost a child. Here is a list of some of these:

The Norwegian SIDS and Stillbirth Society
[Landsforeningen uventet barnedød]
www.lub.no

The Norwegian Organisation for families who have lost a child [Foreningen "Vi som har et barn for lite"]
www.etbarnforlite.no

Relevant brochures and information pamphlets from the Norwegian SIDS and Stillbirth Society [Landsforeningen uventet barnedød, LUB]:

Gravferdsveiledningen – for foreldre som har mistet et lite barn (also available in English) (A funeral for your child: your options and some guidelines)

Når et lite barn dør - i mors liv, ved fødselen eller i sine første leveår (also available in English)
(When a small child dies - in the mother's womb, at birth, or during its first years)

Den doble sorgen – å miste et barnebarn"
(Grandparents and grief)

Plutselige dødsfall – hvordan kan du hjelpe?
(A sudden death - how can you help?)

Nytt svangerskap ved tap av barn
(A new pregnancy after the loss of a child)

Når barnet dør – en brosjyre for helsestasjonen
(When a child dies - a brochure for health personnel)

The National Association for Suicide Survivors
[LEVE – Landsforeningen for etterlatte ved selvmord]
www.levenorge.no

Norwegian Association for children with congenital heart disease [Foreningen for hjertesyke barn]
www.ffhb.no

The Norwegian Cancer Society [Kreftforeningen]
www.kreft.no

The stillbirth and neonatal death charity
SANDs UK supports parents in English in the UK and abroad. www.uk-sands.org

Små barns sorg – informasjon og veiledning til foreldre
(Grief in small children - information and guidance for parents)

Skolebarn og sorg (School children and grief)

Ungdom og sorg (Youths and grief)

Når sorgen rammer en av dine ansatte
(When grief affects one of your employees)

DVD: Samtale om sorg ved tap av barn
(A conversation about grief after the loss of a child)

Landsforeningen uventet barnedød – en presentasjon
(The Norwegian SIDS and Stillbirth Society)

Våre sorgstøttebrosjyrer – en oversikt
(Our bereavement support brochures - an overview)

See also www.lub.no for an updated overview of brochures and literature.

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Some information about LUB:

The Norwegian SIDS and Stillbirth Society [Landsforeningen uventet barnedød, LUB] is a society that provides shared support and help for those that have lost a child suddenly and unexpectedly, regardless of whether the child was alive for a while, died at birth, or during pregnancy. As a nationwide network of volunteers and parents who have lost a child themselves, LUB provides affected families with care and support during their time of grief. LUB also publishes a wide range of information about grief. In addition to bereavement support, research and the prevention of unexpected child death comprise an important part of the association's work.

See LUB's webpage www.lub.no for more information.

My grief, your grief, and our grief?

Grieving over the loss of a child also places a great deal of strain on a couple's relationship.

This brochure describes various ways of living with grief, and how differences between individuals can both challenge and strengthen a couple's relationship.

Intimacy and sexuality are an important part of a relationship. Increasing our understanding of how grief influences our closeness and intimacy, can help parents to be more prepared for problems that typically arise. This can help to prevent conflicts and can also assist couples in better managing their new situation.



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