

***Making or Breaking  
a Marriage:  
Couple Communication at the  
time of loss and over time***

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**Marama** (miscarried), **Brennan William** (fullterm born still),  
**Bryna** (ectopic)

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***Learning Objectives***

- Compare and contrast the different styles of coping (intuitive/affective vs logical/introspective) and describe how they might negatively and positively impact parental relationships
- Describe three things staff, counselors or others could say to couples in the early hours and weeks that might help parents make better intentional communication choices



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## *The Stress on Relationships*

According to a study by authors Katherine Gold, MD, MSW, MS et al. 'Marriage and Cohabitation Outcomes After Pregnancy Loss' Pediatrics, 2010; 125:e 1202-1207

"Men and women tend to grieve differently after pregnancy loss (miscarriage and stillbirth), and parents may find themselves in conflict over coping styles and other matters at an already stressed time.

"...although the majority of couples were able to adjust to a loss and may even grow closer, there may be a subgroup whose relationships are particularly vulnerable to this major stress.

Couples with an unstable relationship before the pregnancy and those with other risk factors for breaking up may find themselves unable to sustain their relationship after such losses.

"A recent, large, well-designed study nearly 20 years after their child's death ...had a 30% rate of marital disruption, compared with 24% for nonbereaved control subjects."



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## *The Stress on Relationships*

Gold's article continued...

"This study finds that married and co-habituating parents are at a significantly greater hazard for separation after miscarriage and this risk is even higher after stillbirth.

Providers who care for bereaved families should recognize that, for some families, the stability of parental relationships may be at increased risk after loss, and they should consider whether selected parents would benefit from relationship support or counseling. "

Sherokee's comments...

This also means that if you are father or mother who have had a loss, working on your relationship afterwards is key to either growing it or potentially losing it. The stakes are high.

However, rather than focusing on the fear and negative possibilities, focus on being motivated to keep your relationship strong.



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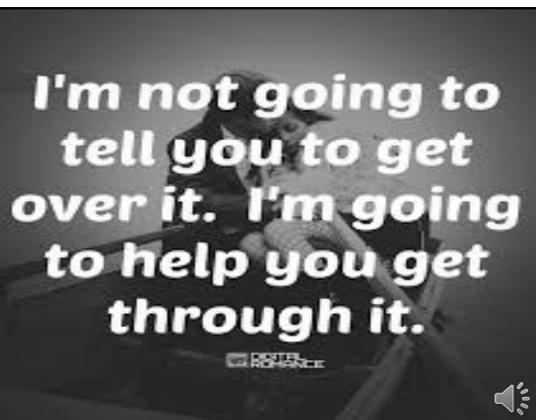
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**Women –**

- Tend and befriend; nurture (cascade of brain chemicals – oxytocin)
- 20,000 words a day
- Women share problems because they want them acknowledged.
- Most women rely on language to cope and deal with losses/crises

**Men –**

- Fight or flight (testosterone levels increase under stress)
- 7,000 words per day
- Men are asking/seeking solutions to problems their partner or their own.
- Many men need physical activity (cutting lawn, shoveling, making something) or ‘doing.’ Simply listening may not be easy for men




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***“Just knowing that there could be a difference in brain patterns may help you understand your partner better and maybe help you forgive him or her for doing things differently than you wish.”***

*--Couple Communication After a Baby Dies  
Sherokee Ilse and Tim Nelson*




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***Daddy’s Grieve Too***

It must be so hard on you to be a Dad who grieves,  
When real men don’t cry or become upset,  
Only women do, you are told to believe.

Your dreams are gone,  
Your future has changed,  
Your wife is just not the same.  
You hold your head as high as you can  
And play your part of the game.

Your heart just tells you differently,  
It aches and hurts you so.  
When will someone give you permission,  
To let your emotions show?




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### *Daddy's Grieve Too*

They ask how your wife is,  
Ignoring the fact you hurt, too.  
You answer the question but always wonder  
When they will ask about you.

Keep the memory alive of the child you love,  
And your love will always shine through.  
And maybe one day this world will know  
That Daddies always grieve, too.

From SANDS TAS June 2001 (Queensland Australia)



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### *Questions Parents Have*

- Why me? Why us?
- How do I 'fix' her?
- I feel so helpless
- I feel so guilty and full of shame
- I let him/her down as a mother/father/partner
- Will we make it as a couple?
- Do we want to?
- What do we do now?
- She/he doesn't understand
- Can I help my partner get through this?
- How do I help him/her?
- Where can we get some help – it is all so overwhelming



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### *Different Coping Styles*

- Logical and introspective** when a baby dies
- Feel emotion, express it physically and in one's head
  - Talk to self, not normally to partner or in public
  - Some things are just private
  - Seek respect and a shared concern for partner
  - Wants to help partner feel better (fix them?) and move forward (may promote moving forward long before partner is ready which can result in looking like they don't care or have moved on quickly)
  - Keep trying new ways to help partner, convinced they have just not found the right words/tools



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## Different Coping Styles

### Intuitive/affective when a baby dies

- Feel emotions and express emotionally. Seek people who are good listeners. Want to be comforted and cared for
- Might have had intuition that something was going to happen or things weren't just right
- Talk to others (writes, shares, chat rooms, support groups...)
- Can't keep it in, many prefer to go public and share with those who might understand
- Replay what happened and wishes to rewrite the script. May feel shame, self-blame and guilt – hard to forgive self
- Arms physically ache to hold baby, cry often, wallow

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## People from Mars...

### Believe/Do

- We keep things to ourselves – don't say them out loud
- Emotions are not allowed or not allowed in public
- Strength and courage are vital; we can help others who are weaker and ...
- Sometimes we need to just sit in front of the fire (tv or newspaper or computer) and think or don't think
- There is a need to solve the problem, find the right tools and fix it (feel frustrated if it does not get fixed)
- We feel the pain but won't/can't admit it
- What if we also wallow and feel low, then how will we survive as a couple. Need to take care of my partner
- Can't understand why 'she' would have rather died. I want to protect her and we can always try for another baby

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## People from Venus...

### Believe/Do

- We share our feelings, thoughts, needs and worries with others – it makes us feel better
- Feeling and being in the mud and wallowing are acceptable. Not seeking answers and don't want to be fixed. Feel better after sharing – might even tell strangers as well as family/friends
- Emotions are necessary and okay to have
- Showing 'weakness' and vulnerability may (or may not) be acceptable – but not usually something to be ashamed of
- Would have rather died to save my baby. Protecting baby is a priority

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### *What Can Care Providers do to Help Prepare and Teach Couples*

- Early hours set the stage for how they go forward
  - Medical Providers have an important role in talking about potential differences and offer ideas to promote understanding and offering early guidance
  - Teach couples about loving their baby, have open conversations, and help each other in the early days can help their relationship in the long run
  - Discover if one is the 'fixer' strong one and the other is the emotional basket case 'weak' one
  - Encourage couple to allow each other to help during the first hours and days – giving examples



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### *What Can Care Providers do to Help Prepare and Teach Couples*

- Show that you honor and care for/about both people, not just mom. Offer a Daddy/Partner 'kit' with essentials such as razor, mints, toothbrush, notepad and pen, stress mints, worry stone, booklet specifically for him/partner
- Have conversations with Daddy/Partner about how they are doing and what they need. Offer them some guidance/advise about how they can be helpful to mom, the importance of being in the moment with baby given that they only have about 2 days to parent their child on this earth, and about not trying to solve all problems and fix mom/others...that pressure and stress isn't good for their health or their relationship



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### *What Can Care Providers do to Help Prepare and Teach Couples*

Examples –  
David and I helped each other in the first hours  
Tim and Monica – similar  
Evan – wasn't able to 'feel' or grieve until he knew partner was going to be okay  
Katherine – 6 years later



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*How Do Couples Understand and Deal with these Differences*

- Examine and recognize that personalities, family traditions, culture, religion, beliefs, etc influence how you cope (and how you support your partner)
- Today women have things to do – mother baby from pregnancy/meeting time to saying goodbye, find clothes, readings, etc. and permission to be sad and grieve (and cry)
- Men used to build the coffin, dig the grave – had jobs to do. Those are now hired out to others. What roles do they have now? Suppose to support, be strong, be a helper (not a griever)
- Parents grieve different children and special times they will miss (babies/5 year olds, high school prom, graduation, college, wedding, babies)



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*Strategies to Promote Healthy, Open Communication*

- Allow your partner to 'give' to you, especially if you are often the strong one who feels responsible. By allowing her to give to you, it helps her grow in her strength and belief that she can 'make it'. That is a specific way to help her – by allowing her to help you (and vice versa).
- Read literature, talk with others who have gone through something similar, become familiar with pitfalls, ways to move forward, what to expect, etc. It may help prepare you. If you know that many couples have great stress which tests their relationship, you might choose to talk about and work on reducing and 'healing' that stress and the issues before they get to big and unwieldy.
- Believe you can make it as a couple and act like it. Stay as positive about your relationship even if you are still in the depths of emotion and grief.
- Respect each other's ways to cope and grieve. May not be the way you would do it at all



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**Strategies to Promote  
Healthy, Open Communication**

- Believe the best of each other, rather than assuming the worst or the negative way of viewing things. Think about what you is before you speak and ask yourself if they mean to ‘hurt’ you. Chances are you might be taking it the wrong way.
- Take the lead in sharing your feelings even if you are not normally comfortable with this
- Find a way to let each other know when things are tough or you need extra hugging and loving or are missing your baby terribly (Hope’s candle)
- Check in every so often – how are you doing today? What is one thing you are worried about? What is one thing you feel blessed about?

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**Strategies to Promote  
Healthy, Open Communication**

- Don’t ‘should’ yourself or each other. She should be feeling better by now and making dinner once and awhile (I wish we could get back to some normalcy). He should be able to take some time off work to be with me (I’m so lonely). I should be able to remember things and go out more often (But I feel so exhausted and my brain does not want to work right)
- When you are feeling a little better, plan some date nights or at least get out of the house for a walk in the park together
- Remember that exercise is a secret to healing – the endorphins from working out (even walking) help you feel better despite yourself
- Agree to disagree – won’t be on the same page all the time

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**Strategies to Promote  
Healthy, Open Communication**

- Accept that you both did the best you could at the time with what you knew and where you were at
- Forgive if you can – yourself, each other, providers, family members. It actually helps *you* when you forgive
- Seek your ‘new normal’ and let go of (and grieve for) the ‘old normal’ that may no longer be who you and your partner are anymore
- Ease back into some fun
- Seek support whenever you need it. You may find that months later and years later, things come back and you are in the ‘thick of it’ again. That happens. It is what it is. Needing support on and off throughout your life is normal and a good sign. Can’t do it all alone

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### *Our wishes to you*

“We are hopeful for you. Remind yourself why you chose each other and what you wish to achieve. Find reasons to make it work, then take steps toward that goal. Love each other fully, and keep talking. Give in and compromise when you can, and then do more. Keep your thoughts positive, and be good to yourselves. Seek outside help before you are feeling too desperate. Use your resources and your humor appropriately. Believe you can make it, and believe in each other. Above all else, remember your love for each other and your baby.”

From—Couple Communication After a Baby Dies



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### *From Sherokee*

“How to sum up 25 years of coping, arguing, remembering, growing, and loving? For years we have more smiles than tears when we talk of our heavenly babies. Thankfully, we had a rather solid relationship before our losses. No doubt that helped. Working through tension and pain was not easy; at times it was downright brutal. However, we had decided not to give up on each other. We wanted our marriage to work and we desperately wanted to have a family. Sometimes we ignored the pain and acted normal. That helped. Sometimes we dwelled on it, and that helped. We prayed often for patience and reminders that we needed each other, and that we had committed our future to each other. That surely helped. No relationship is perfect; ours was far from flawless. We have managed to stay married, most of it quite happily (for over 40 years now).”

— Sherokee Ilse, Couple Communication After a Baby Dies



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### *From Tim*

“Life has dealt your partnership a blow that you did not see coming, nor one you deserve. But the bottom line is—you are the only two people who can make your relationship survive and grow following this experience. That knowledge can be both frightening and empowering at the same time. The key may be in learning to not only give your own grief a voice, but allowing for the fact that your partner’s voice is not merely an echo of your own.

“My final suggestion is this—when the going gets tough, ask yourselves what your child, whom you conceived in love, would want for you? Then the answer can be seen more clearly, and the hard work it takes to make it happen seems more worthwhile.”

— Tim Nelson, Couple Communication After a Baby Dies



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*A Love Song*

The mention of my child's name  
May bring tears to my eyes,  
But never fails to bring  
Music to my ears.  
If you are really my friend,  
Let me hear the beautiful music of his name.  
It soothes my broken heart  
And fills my soul with love.  
-Nancy Williams



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*Gratitudes*

Thank you to the many who helped me create this session and to be a conscientious advocate, including the many unnamed professionals and families throughout the years :

Marti Perhach, GBS Int'l  
Dr. Katherine Gold, MD, Ob Gyn, researcher  
Tim & Monica Nelson  
David Ilse

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