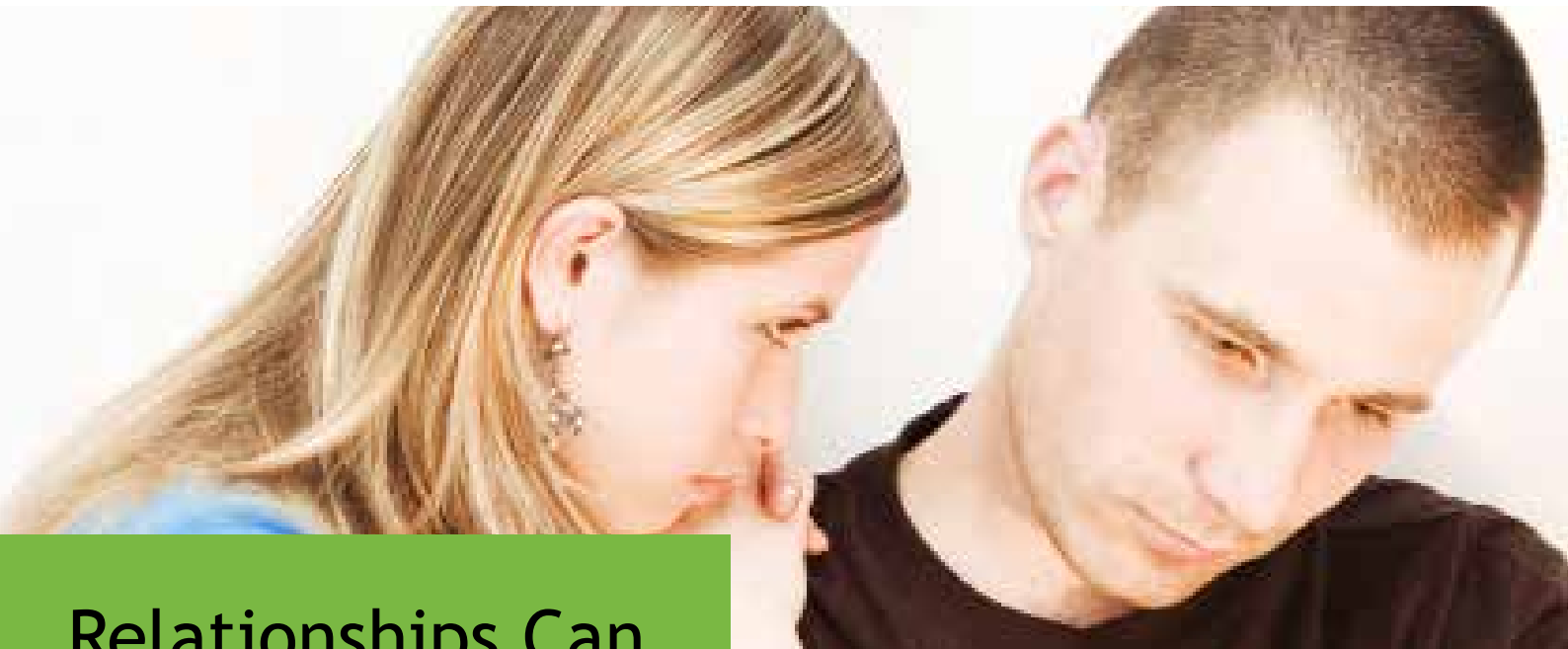


# The Bereavement Buddy

June 2013



## Relationships Can Survive Loss

One couple writes about the unthinkable grief - coping with the death of a child and how relationships can survive loss.

By Sheri & Bob Stritof

When people realize three of our children have died, we hear comments about how amazing it is that our marriage survived such a loss. We also hear dumb statements about how lucky we are to have four healthy kids and how our little ones are in a better place.

### Realities

The reality is that our marriage survived these heartaches because we worked really hard to make sure the two of us would be okay. The reality is that

having surviving children doesn't lessen the pain of losing children. The reality is that I don't care where they may be in the after life, I would prefer to have our babies with us.

### Talk to One Another

Don't ignore or try to bury your feelings. The death of a child will leave you feeling weak and dazed and in shock. You may find yourselves feeling alone and sullen.

It is vital that a couple who has lost a child communicate their feelings with one another. Share your feelings of helplessness, confusion, anger, depression, pain, guilt, fear, and even hate.

Learn and understand the stages of death and dying. Don't allow yourselves to get stuck in one of the stages. If you find your spouse becoming aloof, or if disharmony begins to get more intense in your relationship, seek counselling. Don't try to get through this alone.

## What to Do for Grieving Parents

If the two of us appear to be defensive ... it is because we are defensive. We cringe when we hear what some people say to grieving parents. They have enough to cope with. These couples don't need to deal with hurtful remarks.

If you don't know what to say, then don't say anything. Just give them a hug. Let them know you are available to listen and that you care.

Suzanne Strempek Shea: "I realize that I can't tell you what was inside each of the cards I received after the deaths of my loved ones, but I probably can tell you who made the effort to put something in the mail. If we wait for perfection, get held back by the fear of saying or doing the wrong thing, in most cases nothing gets accomplished. And when it comes to sympathy cards, it's the gesture more than the language that will be remembered long after the envelope is opened. Even if all you do end up doing is signing your name."

Source: Suzanne Strempek Shea. "Putting a Card in the Mail." *Obit-Mag.com*. 3/12/2008.

## Studies and Statistics About Grieving Parents

There are many who believe that there is an extremely high divorce rate (80-90%) when a couple loses a child. Those claims are based on statistics from a study done by Teresa Rando in 1985. ('Bereaved parents: particular difficulties, unique factors, and treatment issues', *Social Work*, vol. 30, p. 20). In 1999, another survey entitled *When a Child Dies* was conducted by The Compassionate Friends organization.

The results about newly bereaved parents didn't match the earlier findings. It is clear that although couples experience great stress, their marriages aren't destined to fall apart. "Overall, 72% of parents who were married at the time of their child's death are still married to the same person. The remaining 28% of marriages include 16% in which one spouse had died, and only 12% of marriages that ended in divorce ... Furthermore, even among the 12% of parents whose marriages ended in divorce, only one out of four of them felt that the impact of the death of their child contributed to their divorce."

"While most of the effect after miscarriage is seen in the first two or three years, the impact of a stillbirth persisted for nearly a decade."

Source: Margarita Bauza. "Couples more likely to break up after pregnancy loss, U-M research finds." *UMich.edu*. 4/05/2010.

"Experts say that parents typically never "get over" the loss of a child, but rather learn to adjust and to integrate the loss into their lives. Still, the death of a child remains one of the most stressful life events imaginable. One-fourth to one-third of parents who lose a child report that their marriage suffers strains that sometimes prove irreparable."

Source: Jane Brody. *Jane Brody's Guide to the Great Beyond: A Practical Primer to Help You and Your Loved Ones Prepare Medically, legally, and Emotionally for the End of Life* Random House. 2009. pg. 143.

"It's estimated that one in five families experiences the pain of miscarriage."

Source: Megan Meany. "Revealing the 'raw heartache' of miscarriage." *MSNBC.msn.com*. 9/2/2009.

## Issues Couples May Face

The first six months following the loss of a child is when the majority of divorces occur. Problems that couples often encounter while dealing with grief include:

- Lack of communication with one another.
- Disagreement on how to parent their other children.
- Being overprotective of other children.
- Whether or not to have another baby.
- Differences in how to grieve.
- Putting blame and guilt on self and/or on spouse.
- Turning to alcohol and drugs.
- Looking for someone or something to blame.
- One wants to talk about the deceased child, and the other doesn't.
- Wondering when and where and how to deal

with a child's belongings.

- Decision about whether or not counseling is needed.
- Financial concerns.
- Turning away from one another.
- One spouse may tend to feel anger sooner than the other.
- One may tend to feel sadness sooner than the other.
- One may want to "do" something to make things right again.
- One may just want to "be."

If a couple had problems before the child's death, those problems can become more difficult to deal with.

## What We Learned

The two of us learned that it was important to remember that life is precious. By being overprotective of our children and one another, we were cheating all of us out of life. We learned to accept that we couldn't always keep our children safe and that we couldn't be in total control of our lives. Bob learned that big boys do cry and that he didn't have to be the strong one or the one to tough it out. We have since tried to live our lives in the present moment.

## There Are No Quick Fixes

Although the first two years are the hardest, the pain is long-lasting. As the two of us were discussing writing this article, we found ourselves with watery eyes and getting emotional even though it has been many years since we lost Little Angel, Susan Sarah, and Teresa Rose.

Although it is important to accept your feelings, it is also important to get on with living your life each day and to not dwell on your grief. Find ways to laugh with one another. With your love for one another, you will weather this storm together.

Source: <http://marriage.about.com/cs/parenting/a/unthinkgrief.htm>

# How Grief Can Affect a Relationship

By Pat Schwiebert, R.N.

The same kind of character that is used in the Chinese language to signify crisis is also used to express both opportunity and danger. Most couples who have experienced the death of their child have also experienced a crisis in their marriage as a result. For some this untimely difficulty has become a rich opportunity for growth bringing the two closer together. But for others the death of their child has been the beginning of the end of their marriage. A widely held belief that a bereaved couple is doomed to divorce is overly pessimistic and needs to be challenged. A more realistic approach is one that acknowledges the danger signs but also recognizes the enormous opportunities for growth.

Each person grieves in his or her own unique way. This is true even for two parents who are grieving the loss of the same child. It is not uncommon, however, for one partner to evaluate the other partner's grieving process based on his or her own style of grieving. He wants her to behave just like he does, and vice versa. If she cries, she thinks he should cry. If he doesn't want to talk he thinks she shouldn't need to talk either.

Behind this pressure to conform is the subtle assumption that one partner's grief will be validated by the behavior of the other partner. In truth, however, how one will most naturally respond to grief, as a man or as a woman, is conditioned by other factors: one's individual personality, one's previous experiences, the cultural role one has inherited from parents, and the unique relationship one has had with the one who died.

Dealing with the grief factor in a relationship is like driving a car with only one cylinder working. Because grief is both physically and emotionally exhausting some people admit they just don't have the energy to care enough to make their marriage work. That doesn't mean the love is gone, only the energy. But know this as grieving partners: Your marriage not only can survive but thrive if both of you are willing to make your relationship a priority during this difficult time.

Below are some dangers to watch for:

- Be aware of any tendency to want to inflict on

to your partner the hurt that you are feeling. It is not uncommon for persons who hurt to do hurtful things, even to those they love. Misery loves company and you may find yourself wanting to make sure your partner is suffering as much as you are, by means of sarcastic comments, harmful accusations, and emotional withdrawal as a means of punishment. Be aware that, in those times when you feel empty and without love to spare, you can be pretty ugly and most unbearable to live with. Give your partner a break!

- Don't expect your partner to be your sole source of emotional support. To do so is not only unfair, but also unwise. Allow some distance between the two of you at times so you don't drag your partner into your pit of gloom on those really bad days. Because men in particular tend to express grief for a shorter period of time than their partners (note that I said express, not experience), some tend to get impatient if they have to face a sullen partner day after day. Sometimes enlist others to listen when you need to express your feelings. Talking about your loss with others helps to take the edge off the stress build up, which then helps in your overall relationship with your partner. It also allows your partner some distance from your pain, which sometimes is good for both of you.
- Keep a list of names and phone numbers of other persons that you can call on short notice.
- When you and your partner can't talk with each other because the pain is too great, write notes to each other.
- Look for ways that you can please your partner or at least ease some of your partner's pain.

None of these suggestions is necessarily easy when you are already dealing with how hard it is to even get up in the morning, or make a decision about what to eat for breakfast. To do what you need to do in a relationship requires the desire to be in touch with how your own grief affects others. It will also help if you have the willingness to see this experience in your life as an opportunity to learn something new about how your partner experiences life in the sad times as well as the good times.

Source: <http://www.griefwatch.com/how-grief-can-affect-a-marriage>

# Getting Help

## **NALAG Centre for Loss & Grief**

NALAG provides FREE counselling and support for anyone who is grieving. This service is currently only available in Dubbo for face to face individual counselling and support.

Phone: 02 6882 9222

Web: [www.nalag.org.au](http://www.nalag.org.au)

## **Lifeline**

For telephone counselling and information.

Phone: 131 114 (24 hours)

Web: [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)

## **Kids & Sids**

SIDS and Kids is dedicated to saving the lives of babies and children during pregnancy, birth, infancy and childhood and supporting bereaved families. We deliver on our vision through world class research; evidence based education and bereavement support; and advocacy.

Sids and Kids offer a 24 hour Bereavement Support and Information Service. Please contact your local SIDS and Kids Office on 1300 308 307.

Web: [www.sidsandkids.org](http://www.sidsandkids.org)

## **Bears of Hope**

Bears Of Hope offers support and guidance for parents who experience the loss of their baby during pregnancy, birth or infancy.

Grief Support - Phone: 1300 11 HOPE

Email: [Support@bears-of-hope.org.au](mailto:Support@bears-of-hope.org.au)

Web: [www.bears-of-hope.org.au](http://www.bears-of-hope.org.au)

## **Other Contacts**

- General Practitioner/Doctor
- Psychologists
- Counsellors

# From the Manager

## NALAG Centre for Loss & Grief



**Trudy Hanson OAM**

*Grief Counsellor & Educator  
Manager, NALAG Centre for  
Loss & Grief, Dubbo*

Well as the financial year comes to an end the NALAG Centre in Dubbo has been very busy with programs and training across NSW. We had the pleasure of welcoming psychologist Philip Hilder to Dubbo to present the Working with Complex Trauma 2 Day Workshop which was sold out in Dubbo and had a great attendance in Tamworth also. Feedback was very encouraging and we will be presenting this workshop in other areas in NSW later in the year.

We have completed the Seasons for Growth Program locally in Dubbo for 8 children and thank our Volunteers for their support and dedication during the program. The Seasons for Growth Program is provided free of charge and is presented by trained volunteers who give of their time to help children facing loss and grief issues.

This issue of the Bereavement Buddy focuses on the changes and challenges loss can have on relationships, particularly the effects of the loss of a child on a marriage or relationship. Usually these challenges are associated with differences in the way each person grieves and a breakdown in communication. Grief is a difficult time for everyone, this we know, when couples are in grief themselves it is often very difficult for them to provide comfort and understanding to one another. It is important to keep the lines of communication open at these times and seek assistance and support to navigate these challenging waters.

Regards

**Trudy**

### **NALAG (NSW) Inc**

NALAG (NSW) Inc President  
Julie Dunsmore AM MAPS Psychologist

NALAG Centre for Loss & Grief Dubbo  
MANAGER Trudy Hanson OAM

Head Office  
Welchman Street, Dubbo NSW 2830

All Mail  
PO Box 379, Dubbo NSW 2830  
Phone: 02 6882 9222  
Fax: 02 6884 9100  
Email: [info@nalag.org.au](mailto:info@nalag.org.au)  
Website: [www.nalag.org.au](http://www.nalag.org.au)

Design: Paula Hanson

### **Waiver**

The views expressed in the Bereavement Buddy are those of the individual authors, and are not necessarily the views of the National Association for Loss & Grief (NSW) Inc.

### **Permission to Reprint**

Personal use of this material is permitted. However, permission to reprint or republish this material for advertising or promotional purposes or for creating new collective works for resale or redistribution in other works must be obtained from the individual copyright owner and all rights therein are retained by authors or by other copyright holders.

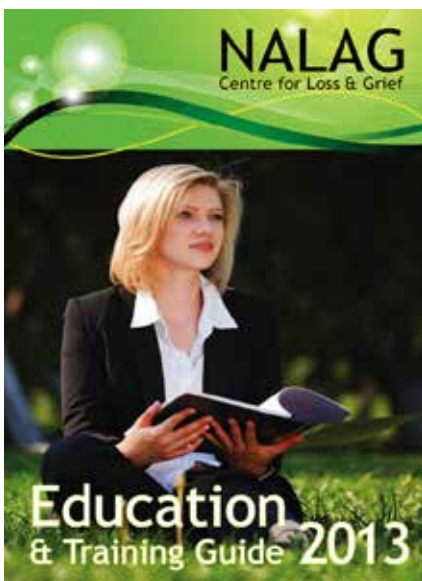
All persons copying this information are expected to adhere to the terms and constraints invoked by each authors' copyright. In most cases, these works may not be reprinted without the explicit permission of the copyright holder.

© Copyright  
National Association for Loss & Grief (NSW) Inc



# For Your Diary

Date	Workshop	Location	Early Bird Closes	Early Bird	NALAG Member	Non NALAG Member
29 July	<b>Working Creatively - Improving Self Esteem in Adolescent Girls</b>	Newcastle	5 July 2013	\$240.00	\$230.00	\$280.00
2 August	<b>Loss &amp; Grief - People With Disabilities</b>	Dubbo	5 July	\$240.00	\$230.00	\$280.00
5 August	<b>Children &amp; Adolescents - Separation &amp; Divorce</b>	Tamworth	8 July	\$240.00	\$230.00	\$280.00
8 August	<b>Infants and Toddlers: Loss, Grief and Trauma</b>	Sydney	11 July	\$240.00	\$230.00	\$280.00
12 & 13 August	<b>Working with Drawings in Grief Counselling</b>	Wagga Wagga	15 July	\$420.00	\$400.00	\$480.00
20 August	<b>Working With Complex Trauma and Mental Health</b>	Newcastle	23 July	\$420.00	\$400.00	\$480.00
6 September	<b>Working Creatively: Improving Self Esteem in Adolescent Girls</b>	Wagga Wagga	9 August	\$240.00	\$230.00	\$280.00
12 September	<b>Children &amp; Adolescents - Separation &amp; Divorce</b>	Sydney	15 August	\$240.00	\$230.00	\$280.00
13 September	<b>Complicated Grief</b>	Dubbo	16 August	\$240.00	\$230.00	\$280.00
18 October	<b>Unspeakable Grief - The Grief of Domestic Violence</b>	Newcastle	13 Sept	\$240.00	\$230.00	\$280.00



## NALAG Education & Training Guide 2013

The NALAG Centre for Loss and Grief have over 35 workshops scheduled during 2013. To download a copy of our Education and Training Guide which contains workshop descriptions, presenter profiles and information about registration and venues, please visit our website [www.nalag.org.au](http://www.nalag.org.au).

## Register for a Workshop

The NALAG Centre for Loss and Grief require all registrations to be performed using our online system please go to our website [www.nalag.org.au/events.html](http://www.nalag.org.au/events.html).

### Bookings and Enquiries

NALAG Centre for Loss & Grief  
Dubbo  
Ph: 02 6882 9222  
Email: [education@nalag.org.au](mailto:education@nalag.org.au)

### Join Our Mailing List

Keep up to date with education and training on offer and we will also send you copies of The Bereavement Buddy each month. **Join Now!**