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Paige W. Toller

University of Nebraska at Omaha, ptoller@unomaha.edu

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Using Communication to Cope with Loss

The [death of a child](#) is a devastating and life changing event. A child's death leaves parents struggling to somehow pick up the pieces of their shattered life and continue living. In the aftermath of their loss, parents are often surprised and disappointed to discover how difficult it is to talk to one another about their child's death. Likewise, parents may be frustrated to learn that they grieve very differently from their spouse. In many cases, one parent wants to talk a great deal about the child's death while the other does not. In addition, one parent may be more likely to express their grief through open displays of emotion while the other chooses to grieve more privately. The differences in how they grieve and talk about their child's death can create marital conflict. However, parents can use five communication practices to help them to accept their individual grieving styles and still share the loss as a couple.



Learn to accept differences. For bereaved parents, accepting the differences in how each other grieves means acknowledging and embracing how their partner chooses to express his or her grief. In some cases this may require parents to accept that their spouse desires to not talk about their child's death or openly share his or her emotions. Parents can work to accept their differences in grieving by talking and telling each other what provides them support and what behaviors or activities are uncomfortable. Using [active and empathic listening](#) will help parents gain a better understanding of why their partner grieves as they do. By talking openly about their needs and listening to each other, bereaved couples will be able to stay connected to each other and allow each other to grieve as they see fit. Learning to accept one another's grieving styles is not easy for parents, but it can allow couples to grow closer and stronger during a very difficult time.

Compromise. Another way that bereaved parents can manage conflict over dissimilar grieving is to compromise and create strategies that allow them to partially fulfill their partner's needs while still honoring their own preferences. For instance, if a couple experiences conflict because one desires to regularly visit the child's grave as a couple and the other does not, they can find middle ground by agreeing that they will both visit the grave together at certain times. They can also agree that the parent who does not desire to visit the gravesite as frequently has the right to not go to the cemetery at certain times. By finding a balance between both of their needs

parents can give each other the freedom to grieve as they wish while still honoring the other's wishes.

Rely on nonverbal communication. For parents who find it difficult to talk about their child's death, [nonverbal communication](#) can be used to convey support and caring. For example, physical displays of affection such as holding one another's hand or cuddling can communicate love and understanding. Likewise, writing each other a letter detailing their emotions allows a couple to share with their partner without requiring each other to be open verbally. This act gives more reticent parents a chance to share their thoughts and feelings in a way that is more comfortable to them.

Seek outside help. For some parents, compromising or learning to accept their dissimilar ways of grieving may be too difficult to manage on their own. Seeking outside assistance from either a [professional grief counselor](#) or a grief support group can greatly help parents understand and accept their dissimilar grieving. Peer-led bereavement support groups, like the [Compassionate Friends](#), can offer newly bereaved parents support and advice on how to deal with their dissimilar grieving and maintain relational closeness.

Find supportive family and friends. Family and friends can also be a strong source of support in situations where parents find it difficult to manage their differences in grieving. For parents who desire to talk openly about their child's death, sharing with family and friends allows them to meet their need to discuss their loss without further relying on their spouse for support. If they do not have supportive family and friends, bereavement support groups and even [online support groups](#) may be able to meet parents' needs to talk about their child.

In conclusion, the death of a child does not have to mean the [death of a marriage](#). Couples can use communication to manage their dissimilar grieving styles in ways that honor their own individual preferences. Giving each other freedom to grieve in their own way ultimately allows parents to stay connected as a couple. Moreover, when their spouse cannot provide them the support they need parents can rely on family, friends, and support groups for comfort and solace. For bereaved parents, the journey that is grief, while often lonely, does not have to be traveled alone.

[Return to Issue Homepage >>](#)



About the author: [Paige W. Toller](#) is an Assistant Professor in the School of Communication Studies at the University of Nebraska-Omaha in Omaha, NE, USA. This essay appeared in the August 2009 issue of *Communication Currents* and was translated from the scholarly article: Toller, P. W., & Braithwaite, D. O. (2009). "Grieving together and apart": Bereaved parents' negotiation of marital contradictions. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 37, 257-277. The *Journal of Applied Communication Research* and *Communication Currents* are publications of the [National Communication Association](#).



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