

Helping Your Partner through Pregnancy Loss

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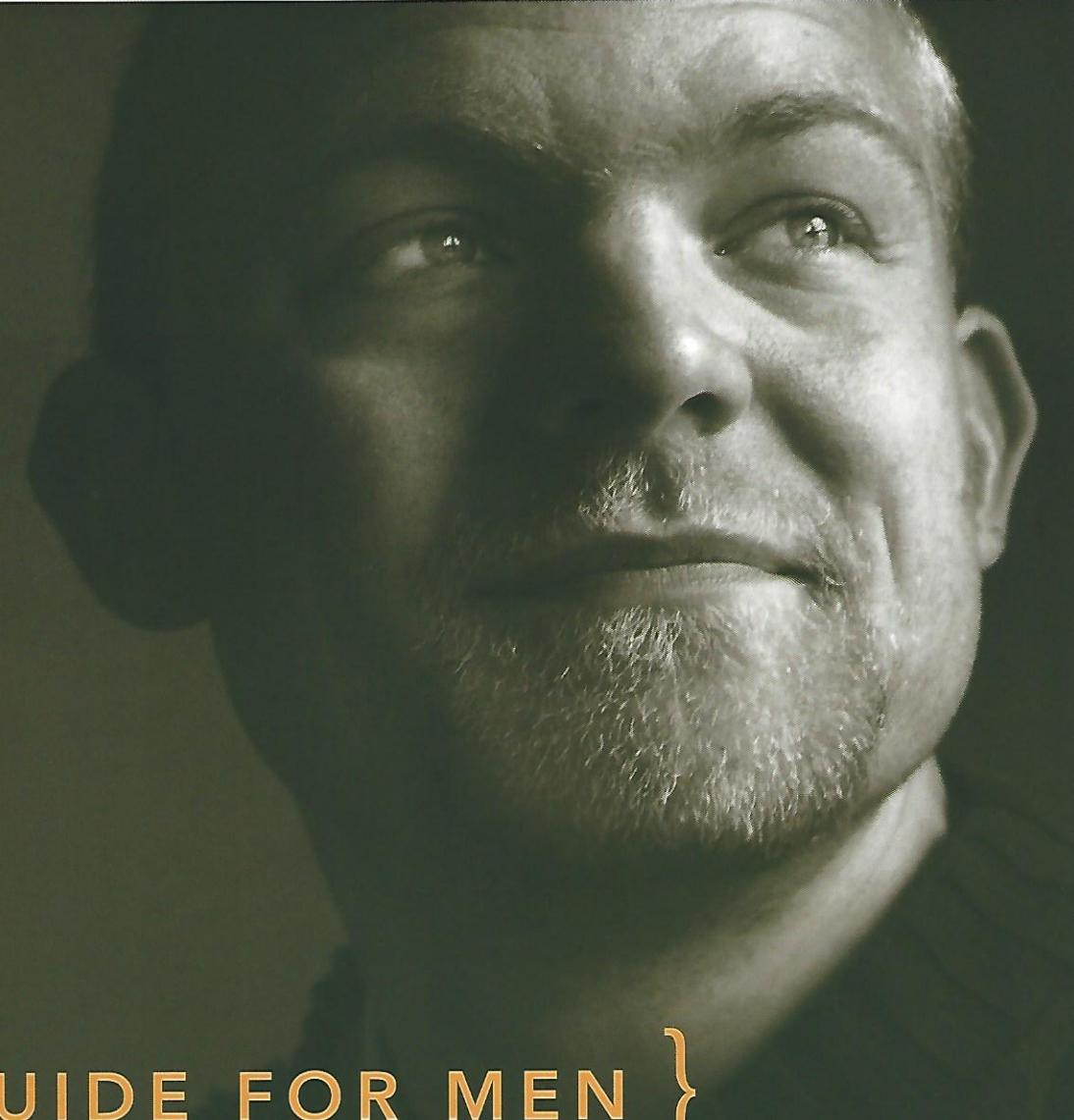
FOR MOST OF US, pregnancy loss is the cruelest and most difficult part of the infertility journey. Failed cycles and failed in vitro fertilization (IVF) embryo transfers are hard enough, but to finally get pregnant only to miscarry can be heartbreak for both partners. It can be emotionally wrenching, and can evoke strong feelings of frustration and defeat. Each partner is in need of understanding and support from the

other, just when the other may have nothing left to give.

As men, we can feel anything from numbness to heartbreak at losing a pregnancy, but our partners' pain may be worse. She can become so deeply grief-stricken that she may seem inconsolable, which may leave you feeling ineffectual, frustrated and helpless, desperately wishing for a way to cheer her up. (This would help you feel better too!)

Then when you try to fix the situation with kind words or deeds, she may respond with resistance or anger, prompting you to become frustrated and angry, thus compounding the problem.

The good news is that with any of the setbacks you both may face on your fertility journey, including pregnancy loss, learning a few simple principles and putting them into practice can make a tremendous



{ A GUIDE FOR MEN }

By Peter Hume Hunsberger, EdD

difference to your partner and your relationship. What she needs from you may not come naturally, and may fall outside of your comfort zone, but if you stay focused, you can be successful. These principles have been tested on scores of couples in my psychotherapy practice and consulting work as a psychologist over the past several years. I hope they can help you support your partner effectively and main-

tain a strong relationship after a pregnancy loss.

Principle #1: *Her experience of the pregnancy loss is much different from yours and may be more painful.* Even if you are very sensitive and empathetic, you have not suffered the same loss as your partner, and *unless you recognize this you will be frustrated in your efforts to help her.* She may have grown up

with a much greater focus on becoming a parent than you have. Since puberty, her body has reminded her monthly that bearing children is her biological imperative, and as an adult she most likely has been reminded of this by family, friends and even strangers when they ask, "Do you have any children?" or "When are you going to have children?" Getting pregnant

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can be deeply fulfilling for her, providing a profound sense of purpose and meaning. From the minute she learns that she is pregnant, she takes on the role of mother, bonding deeply with the fragile life within her and feeling a strong sense of responsibility to protect this being.

Losing a child through miscarriage is a deep and multifaceted loss. She might feel betrayed by her body for not protecting the new life inside her, while at the same time feeling guilty that she may have done something to harm her baby and somehow caused the miscarriage. She will be confused and stung at being so summarily “fired” from the mother role she had just started to enjoy. And she may feel jealous and angry at other mothers with infants and young children. The precipitous drop in pregnancy hormones right after pregnancy loss intensifies her sense of emptiness and devastation and can render her emotionally fragile.

I am not saying that men do not experience profound loss and frustration at pregnancy loss—we do. We have hopes and dreams of fatherhood and bonding with the new baby, and we can feel very upset, angry and deeply grief-stricken by a miscarriage.

To get a sense of how devastating pregnancy loss can be to your partner, imagine that just after you started to settle into a rewarding job you had trained and worked hard to

get, you were suddenly fired without any explanation. Furthermore, imagine that to get another job you had limited time and job interviews. If you didn’t land a job soon you would forever be prevented from having any job, and your life would become an endless series of reproaches from others who had successful and rewarding careers, who kept asking you, “Why don’t you have a job yet?”

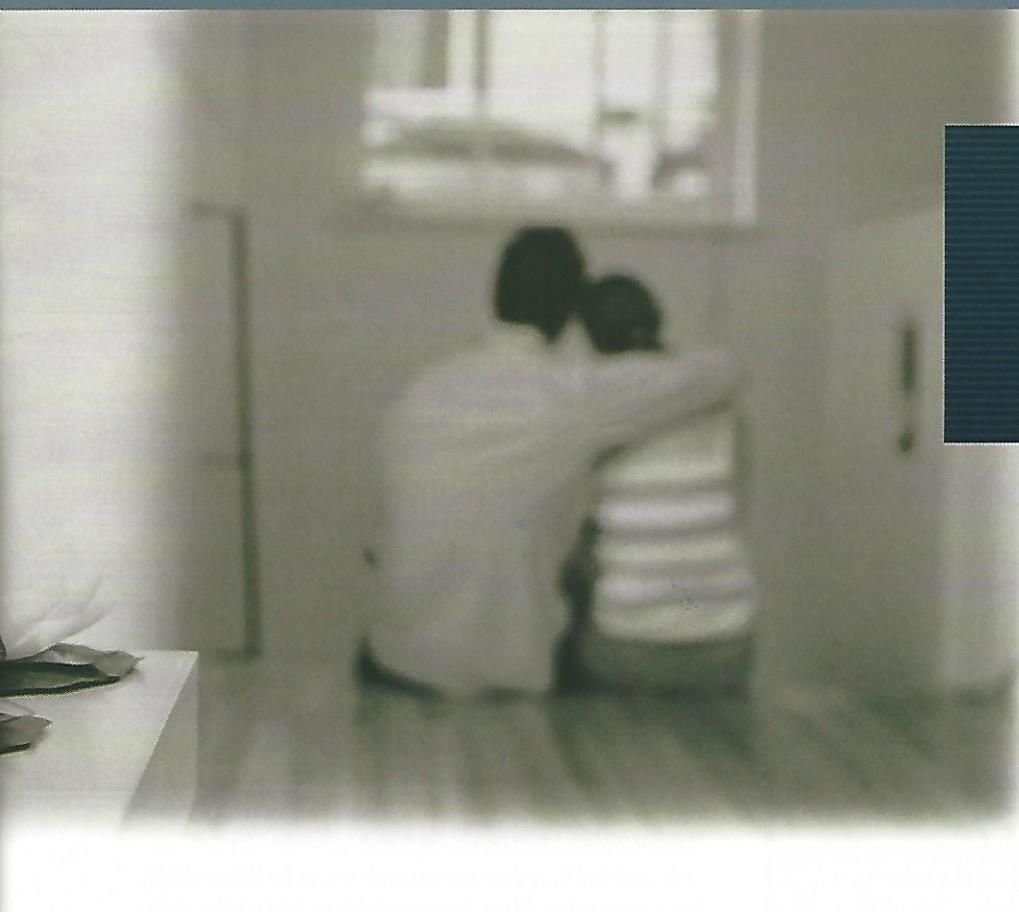
Principle #2: Not only is your partner’s experience of the loss very different from yours, but *what she needs in order to heal is very different, too*. From birth, parents generally treat boys more roughly than girls, expecting them to be tougher. At a very young age, while girls are having tea parties and play house and dress up—learning to *communicate, connect and share* with each other—boys are fighting with each other and playing King of the Mountain—learning to be *goal-focused, to compete* against each other, and to *suppress their feelings* to reach the goal. Our male battle mentality also often leads us to *seek aloneness* for rest and safety, in direct contrast to most women.

These gender-based approaches to life’s problems are cross-cultural, and are reinforced as we grow up. As a result, adult women tend to focus on networking, communicating and sharing in order to feel comforted, safe and fulfilled, and men tend to seek solitude and to figure out solutions to challenges.

Principle #3: Here is the challenging part: what she needs from you after any setback on your fertility journey, especially after a miscarriage, is probably *not* for you to try to cheer her up, to “make it better” or to try to fix it, unless she specifically asks for these things. Instead, *what she most needs is for you to just be with her in her grief, to try to understand her feelings and to show her that you love her*. Connectedness and support are what she needs to cope with the loss.

This may sound simple, but it is actually very difficult for men to stifle their goal-focused instinct to “fix” the problem. I have personally fallen into this trap more times than I care to admit. We instinctively try to cheer up our partner, or distract her from her grief by changing the topic or suggesting fun activities or ways she can think of it differently so she won’t feel so bad. The problem with all of these efforts is that they focus on *changing her or her feelings*, not on connecting with how she is feeling in the moment. *What she most needs is for you to connect with her, not change or minimize her feelings!*

Just after a pregnancy loss your partner may be unable or unwilling to tell you what she needs from you. She may be too shocked and distraught to know what she needs. Or, she may feel guilty at having put you through the pregnancy loss, thus she may not ask you for anything. Whatever the reason,



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your job remains the same—to show her that you are *with* her and care about her. If you have reached out to her in the past in ways that she has appreciated, start with those. If you're not sure what to do, just hug her, tell her you love her and that you're sorry this has happened. Ask her how you can help, or if what you are doing feels helpful to her. Even though she might not know what she needs at the time, this lets her know you care, and it gives her permission to talk later, when she is more aware of and able to say what she needs. Two specific ways you can connect with and support your partner after a pregnancy loss are:

- Accompany her to follow-up medical visits; the doctor may give her

disturbing news and she may need your support at that time.

- Play the invaluable role of spokesperson to family and friends so your partner does not have to call them with the sad news about the pregnancy loss. It is important to agree who should be told and how much detail to share. By doing this you both can feel more in control and can articulate what would be helpful to both of you during this healing time.

Principle #4: Just as your partner is a unique person, and her reactions and needs after a miscarriage may not be the same as other women's, you will also have your own unique reactions and needs. It is okay to tell her what you need. For instance, you might need to take a break to clear your mind after dealing with the

shock of a miscarriage. Exercise, such as running or bike riding, can often relieve physical tension and stress. You also may need a nap, a meal, a walk or a talk with a close friend to help you sort things out in your mind. The point is that *you need to take care of yourself, both for your own sake and to have the energy to keep supporting your partner.*

Principle #5: *It is okay to seek outside help and support.* Each of you may need to turn to others for support until you are able to be there for each other. A few sessions with a good couples therapist can help you both understand and deal with hurt and frustrations, and improve communication and intimacy. Other resources include RESOLVE's literature, member-to-member contact and support groups, and compassionate friends. ☺

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