

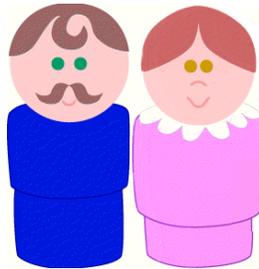
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baby or her uncharacteristic sexual aggressiveness may put off her partner, who may then resist her advances.

Tina: I think initially we were very close emotionally and sexually. As we moved a little bit further out from it, and then there was talk of being pregnant, it was like he thought the only reason I wanted to have sex was so I could get pregnant. And there was a lot of tension about that, a lot of fights. If he thought that we were gonna be close to being sexual, it was like he'd do everything in his power not to do anything. I remember, goin' through my mind. "That's it! We're done! I'm divorced! I'm leavin' him!"

Expressing Closeness

For some bereaved couples, touching, hugging, and cuddling continue. They can feel loved and the comfort of skin-to-skin contact without going further. In fact, many people think of touching, hugging, and cuddling, as sexual, so not having intercourse doesn't mean they stop being sexual. However, just as couples may experience a decline or a gap in relations, they may experience a decline in touching, hugging, and cuddling.



Brett: There were a lot of things I needed, but I didn't get from her. And there was a lotta, just even the hugging, the holding, even some talking about it. And it wasn't her job to fix me. There wasn't anybody that was capable of doing that.

Joan: I think there would've been times even when he wanted to hug me or he wanted to give me support, and I just didn't want it. I just felt like I wanted to deal with my grief myself.

Brett: That was so uncharacteristic, that you weren't there.

Brett and Joan eventually returned to being fully in contact, and that was the experience of most other couples who talked with me about a gap or decline in touching, hugging, and cuddling.

New Emotions

For couples who continue to have marital relations after a child dies, and for those who return after a gap, the experience is often different in important ways from what it was before the child died. What is most commonly reported is that relations are emotionally charged and immensely meaningful in new ways. For many bereaved parents, sex becomes, at least when first resumed, a powerful, life-affirming experience, a symbol of healing and being back together as a couple. For many bereaved parents, the act has new meanings that bring up powerful

new emotions. The emotions may be felt or expressed in different ways, but it is common for tears to be part of it all.

Joy: I can't even remember the first time that we made love after the accident, but I remember always just really crying after it, just sobbing, and just bringing so many emotions to the surface, and I used to think, "Aw, he's going to quit making love to me 'cause all I do is sob afterwards'."

Jane: One thing I've noticed, any time we were intimate, almost always, even though I wasn't sobbing or anything like this, just the emotion. Almost every time one or the other of us would say, and it just really didn't exactly relate, and yet we just really missed him. You just were emotional, and that was the biggest emotion in our lives. We just missed him and so frequently I would get tears in my eyes, or my husband would, and we would just say to each other, "I sure still miss him."

Patience

For bereaved parents, it may be helpful to know that our research indicates that a break or decline in a couple's sexual relationship or in touching, hugging, and cuddling is not so much a difficulty as one of the things that often happens when a child dies. It's not a sign of anything disastrous in the couple's relationship or a warning about future difficulties. As with other aspects of the grief process, declines or gaps in physical contact call for patience and understanding. In the long run, many couples move on to profound depths of intimacy and develop greater mutual understanding, empathy, and communication through the process of grieving and loving together.

By Paul C. Rosenblatt, Ph.D.
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*Time does not really
heal a broken heart –
It only teaches a person
how to live with it.*

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