

## MEN IN PAIN

### Walk away or stay?

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You've heard the comments:

- ◆ "Men can't handle pain."
- ◆ "Men think they're so tough. They could never go through the pain of childbirth."
- ◆ "Men may not cry as much as women, but they sure don't like pain."
- ◆ "My husband was in pain for weeks before he finally told me. I took him into the emergency room immediately and the doctor said, 'Why'd you wait so long?' I responded, 'What do you expect? He's a man.'"



In my work with hundreds of bereaved people it has become clear to me that a huge part of the bereavement process is the management of pain. Let me ask you some questions about the emotional pain you've been feeling related to the death (or deaths) in your life:

1. How much pain are you in right now? On a scale below, choose a number:

1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7-----8-----9  
None                      A little                      Some                      A great deal                      An extreme amount

2. Where is it located? In your heart, gut, head, face, throat, eyes, jaw, neck, shoulders, chest?
3. Does it move from one part of your body to another?
4. Is it dull or sharp?
5. Is it concentrated in one area or is it widespread?
6. What causes it to become greater or less?
7. How do you decrease it?

I hope you are not reading this sentence without having answered the prior questions. If not, will you go back and answer the questions? Good. What did you discover about yourself? What do you realize about the intensity and description of your pain? Most importantly, is there anything that you can do about it?

Much research has been conducted on physical pain. However, it is difficult to conduct real studies because most ethics boards (rightly) prevent researchers from delivering painful stimuli directly to a person's body, even if they volunteer.

What we do know is that the report of pain is a combination of objective and subjective data. We know that we can plunge the hands of several hundred volunteers into ice water and ask to keep them there for 90 seconds and find a wide range of self-reported levels of pain. Thus, the self-reports of pain vary widely from person to person.

**When it comes to emotional pain, such as that which accompanies a loved one's death, researchers have a difficult time conducting meaningful studies.**

Has this ever happened to you? You are having a heated discussion on a difficult issue with a person you care for deeply and the person suddenly leaves—splits—takes off—disappears! If you are the person left standing, it is likely that you become even more ticked (a nice word for boiling MAD). Why would someone do this to you? Or if you are the fleeing person, why are you taking off in the middle of a sentence?

A beginning answer to these questions has been the subject of fascinating research from the lab of psychologist John Gottman. Dr. Gottman has been investigating the way couples handle conflict in their marriage. He invites couples into his lab, hooks them up with wires attached to machines that measure their heart rate, blood pressure, breathing and so on. He then asks the couple to discuss an area of disagreement in their relationship while he videotapes. Amazingly, after a few minutes the couple has acclimated to their new environment and is bickering away. As a result, for the first time in history, we are able to have a close look at exactly what happens to a person's body in the midst of an argument.

Gottman found some obvious results.

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The more sensitive the topic, the higher  
the level of physiological arousal.

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His most intriguing finding, however, was evidence from the physiological data that one of the partners often displays consistently higher levels of arousal. Furthermore, the arousal levels are often sometimes *so painful* that the partner finds it necessary to get up and leave the room.

And who is the partner more likely to do this?

Have you guessed it, yet? That's right: *men*.

When I give workshops on anger and grief, and I get to the point of revealing who it is that most often leaves during an argument, I pause for a moment and when I say “men,” the room explodes with laughter. And the laughter is not, I believe, a way intended to put down men; but, for those who live with a man, especially a bereaved man, the laughter appears to be a release that finally validates what both parties have known all along.

In keeping with the opening statement that some of the information in this so-called men’s section may also apply to women, Gottman found that some of the people who left were women.

Here’s a question for you: What are *you* more likely to do during a discussion of a highly charged issue such as the death of your loved one?

If what you are reading makes sense to you, I want to end with a few suggestions:

1. Show this article to the person(s) in your life who might benefit from reading it.
2. Sit down and decide on a signal that you both could use that indicates your need to leave the scene. For example, it could be a hand signal, making the letter “T” for time out. Also, as I say to my audiences, giving your partner the middle finger is not the kind of signal that is helpful.
3. In your discussion of the signal, make an agreement that whoever uses the signal is the one responsible for bringing up the (obviously difficult) topic of discussion as soon as their physiological arousal level has returned to normal.
4. If you are the partner who more often stays, understand that it may take your partner several minutes to several hours to return to normal. In some rare cases, you may have to wait until the next day.
5. To repeat: It is critical that you return to the topic of discussion as soon as both partners are ready. Do not use this technique as a way to avoid discussing difficult issues.
6. On the other hand, there may be a few issues that are just too difficult to discuss at all. For example, a year after the teenage daughter of a couple was murdered by her boyfriend, they had several intense arguments over forgiveness: the husband had reached a point where he had forgiven the murderer and the wife vehemently disagreed. After more than a year of several screaming arguments, the couple went to counseling and eventually hammered out an agreement that any discussion of forgiveness was off limits. Although neither partner relished the idea of closing off certain areas of communication, they both agreed that, in this case, it was the best solution.

**Physical pain is tough. Emotional pain is often tougher, especially when it is in response to the death of someone we love.**

For reasons that experts are still sorting out it appears that many men and some women have a predisposition to experience high levels of physiological arousal, i.e., pain, in the context of discussing emotionally charged issues. In our increasing understanding of the grieving process, this fact can help us as we interact with the important people in our life.