

Name

**Men in Pain: Walk Away or Stay?**

***by Bob Baugher***

**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.”

In my work with bereaved people, it has become clear that a huge part of the bereavement process is the management with pain. And it seems fair to say that most men manage their pain differently than most women.

We know from studying physical pain that our experience of it varies widely from person to person.

For instance, if we were to plunge the hands of several hundred volunteers into ice water for 90 seconds, we would find a wide range of self-reported levels of pain.

Similarly, we each perceive and experience differently the emotional pain that comes with the death of someone we love.

**Where are you going?**   
Has this ever happened to you? You and a person you care for deeply are having a heated discussion on a difficult issue when, all of a sudden, the person leaves, splits, takes off, disappears! If you are the person left standing, you probably become even more ticked. 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?

Psychologist John Gottman is uncovering the answer to this in his research on married couples. He invites a couple into his lab and hooks them up to equipment that measures heart rate, blood pressure, breathing, and so on. He then asks the couple to discuss an area of disagreement while he videotapes.

In a few minutes, the couple is bickering away. And we, for the first time in history, have a close look at exactly what happens to a person’s body during an argument.

Gottman found that the more sensitive the topic, the higher the level of physiological arousal. More intriguing was his finding that one of the partners often displays consistently higher levels of physiological arousal.

Furthermore, the arousal levels are often so painful that the partner finds it necessary to get up and leave the room.

And who is the partner most liked to do this? Have you guessed it yet? That’s right, men.

So, as a man, what are you more likely to do during a discussion of a highly charged issue such as the death of your loved one?

1. If you are likely to walk out of a painful argument, I want to offer you a few suggestions: Show this article to the person in your life who might benefit from reading.
2. Decide on a signal you both can use to indicate your need to leave the scene. For example, you might use the hand signal, making the letter “T” for time out.
3. Agree that if you use the signal you are responsible to bring up the difficult topic of discussion as soon as your physiological levels have 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 get physiological responses back 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, understand that 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, the couple had several intense arguments over forgiveness. The husband had reached a point of forgiving the murderer and the wife vehemently disagreed.

After more than a year of screaming arguments, the couple went to counseling and eventually agreed that discussion of forgiveness was off limits. Although neither partner relished closing off an area of communication, they both agreed that 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 when discussing emotionally charged issues.

In your increasing understanding of the grieving process, this fact can help you as you interact with the important people in your life.