

Being Stoic for the Spouse's Sake Comes at a High Cost

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Among life's many tragedies, the death of a child is one that is perhaps the greatest for parents. No matter what the age of the child or the cause of death, the irrefutable fact of the loss is one that shatters the normal cycle of life, leaving parents traumatized and often incapacitated by grief.

Research on coping with bereavement has focused primarily on the individual, despite the fact that family and married relationships are all profoundly disrupted by the loss. But in the wealth of studies about parental grief, little attention has been paid to precisely how couples relate to each other as they struggle to come to terms with the death of a child.

A new research article published in [*Psychological Science*](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#), addresses this gap in bereavement research by focusing on the way that couples together process the grief of losing a child.

"Scientific literature focused on individual rather than interdependent processes in coping with bereavement, despite the fact that bereaved people do not grieve alone and the way one person grieves likely influences another," says psychological scientist Margaret Stroebe, who conducted the research with her colleagues at the Utrecht University and VU University Amsterdam.

In this study, the researchers interviewed 219 couples that had lost a child. The parents were from 26 to 68 years old, and the causes of their children's death ranged from stillbirth, to illness, accident, SIDS, suicide or homicide. They were asked to rate how much they agreed with statements like "I stay strong for my partner," "I hide my feelings for the sake of my partner," or "I try to spare my partner's feelings." The researchers collected the data at three different timepoints: six, thirteen and twenty months after the loss.

These questions examined a phenomenon they referred to as Partner-Oriented Self-Regulation (POSR), which captures the way in which couples either avoided discussion of their loss or attempted to remain strong for the sake of the partner. Many husbands and wives believe that these two strategies help to alleviate grief, but Stroebe and her colleagues found that the strategies actually exacerbated the problems of grieving. They found that POSR was not only associated with an increase in the person's own grief but also with an increase in the partner's grief. Moreover, these relationships persisted over time.

There is a paradox, Stroebe says, "While parents seek to protect their partners through POSR, this effort has the opposite effect, and it is associated with worse adjustment over time. Surprisingly, our results suggest that POSR has costs, not benefits, and not only for the partner but also for the self."

These surprising results may be explained by the role of self-regulation in the grieving process. Our ability to self-regulate is essential for dealing with the world, but exerting excessive efforts to contain our emotions and regulate our feelings, thoughts, and behavior exact important interpersonal and

individual costs. Like a muscle that becomes exhausted after exertion, too much self-regulation actually depletes our ability to self-regulate in various domains including physical health and goal accomplishment.

Ultimately, these attempts at self-regulation may prevent partners from coping with the loss of their child. Suppressing emotions can have adverse effects on grief between couples. One partner may think that painful feelings aren't accepted, for example, or a partner might misinterpret no apparent grief as a lack of actual grief.

“One important implication of this research is that, in cases where professional help is indicated, clinicians can — when appropriate — guide bereaved clients away from POSR and toward sharing their grief, thereby easing their suffering,” Stroebe says.