

## Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

**My son's wife left him four months ago and took their kids with her. He's been having a very hard time with this, but he won't talk about it. How can I tell if his grief over this loss is "normal" or if he is truly depressed and in need of some kind of treatment?**

**-- Amy**

Dear Amy,

Your son has suffered a heart-breaking loss. There's no question about it. The end of an important relationship is like a death, and grieving is both normal and healthy under these circumstances.

I would need to know more about your son's behavior in order to help you determine whether his grief would be better described as a major depression. Let me give you some signals and signs of depression:

1. Depressed mood most of the day, nearly every day, for two weeks or more.
2. Abnormal loss of interest and pleasure most of the day, nearly every day, for two weeks or more.
3. An appetite or weight disturbance – and note that this may mean a loss of appetite and subsequent weight loss (without dieting) or a weight gain and the desire to eat everything in sight.
4. Sleep disturbances. Again, this can go either way – insomnia or sleeping all the time.
5. Poor concentration and an inability to make decisions.
6. Abnormal self-reproach or inappropriate guilt.
7. Morbid thoughts of death or talking about suicide.
8. Substance abuse.

Depression can be like a downward spiral, with no signs of improvement over time. Grief ebbs and flows, getting better over time, though this takes a lot longer than people (especially those who are not grieving at the moment) might believe. Does your son show some sparks of enthusiasm and interest from time to time? Does he go to work or interact with his friends? Importantly, does he continue to have a relationship with his children?

What is more important than this differential diagnosis between grief and depression, however, is that your son is suffering. The fact that he doesn't talk about it is not healthy.

The path to healing for both grief and depression includes giving voice to feelings, to bring what is held darkly inside into the bright light of day. Most people find comfort in talking about their feelings to a compassionate friend, but many others write in a journal, or express their heartbreak in music or art. All are legitimate and powerful ways to articulate the pain inside. What does not work is to hold everything inside. This only makes things worse. The American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow hit the nail on the head when he said, "There is no grief like the grief that does not speak."

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Tell your son that you love him, and that you want to help. Let him know that you are there for him, when and if he wants to talk with you about his feelings. But also let him know that there are other people who want to listen with compassion. Does he have a minister, priest, or rabbi who could help? Are there grief- or divorce-support groups in your community? Will he talk to his family doctor or a psychotherapist about his feelings? At the very least, reading one of the many excellent books about loss and grief could help him. A bookstore or library is a non-threatening place to get started on the journey of healing.

When we're in the midst of grief or depression it becomes difficult to remember how we felt when we were happy. We lose sight of what our lives could be like, feeling banished forever to the sadness that envelops our hearts. But human beings are incredibly resilient, and we can -- and do -- go on. Each of us makes choices about whether the painful events of our lives will make us a better person or a bitter one.

Like the mythical Phoenix, we can rise above the ashes of our loss and soar into our futures with greater wisdom, compassion, and awareness. I hope that your son can remember this, even while his heart is broken.

Send your personal coaching questions to [kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com](mailto:kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com) or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2003 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) [www.fullpotentialliving.com](http://www.fullpotentialliving.com)