



**Joy Smith Ed.D. Licensed Professional Counselor**

She never saw it coming. After a long day at work, Susan came home to find an envelope bearing her name on the dining room table. Her husband of twenty years, the man she had loved and trusted, found someone else to love.

In my office, she sobbed uncontrollably as she tried to sort through an overwhelming flood of emotions. The marriage she thought would last forever was crumbling and she was too shocked to fully comprehend what was happening. But there was one thing she did know. As the tears rolled down her cheeks, she placed a trembling hand over her chest and whispered, "I can feel it! I can feel my heart breaking!"

Coming to terms with the realities of an irreparable marriage can be a devastating experience. Nothing can compare to the sadness of grieving the loss of hopes and dreams for a relationship that was supposed to last a lifetime. Even in the most toxic and unworkable marriages, there is tremendous pain in letting go of what should have been.

No marriage ends suddenly, even if the news is a total surprise for one or both partners. Marriages begin to end long before the final whimper. Some begin to die a slow death soon after the marriage begins, a casualty of cancerous disillusionment and unrealistic expectations. Other marital situations are so toxic and abusive, the demise of the relationship is more analogous to murder. Yet others begin well but are lost in the consuming process of managing careers, children and the challenges of life.

Common wisdom is that couples divorce over sex or money. Neither of these are ever the direct cause. Failure to communicate and be real with one another is more often the marital quicksand in which relationships are lost forever. When this happens, the marriage dies an insidiously silent death where there may be conversation, but no communication about the real issues. Unproductive conflict is sometimes mistaken for communication, leaving couples so caught up in fighting with each other, they quit fighting for the relationship.

The failure of a relationship can elicit consuming feelings of failure and abandonment; it is in many respects worse than a physical death. But like a death, divorce requires grieving. Persons dealing with relationship loss experience the same grief stages typical of the physical death of a partner: shock, denial, despair, and detachment. As in death, all of these stages are important and necessary for healing to take place.

Grieving a divorce can be so painful that the idea of risking another relationship is incomprehensible. Yet love cannot be fully experienced again until the wounded heart has mended. Healing requires careful analysis of failed relationships so we can learn from

them and make different choices. Nothing is more painful than finding oneself in the same place again, replaying scripts from the past.

The purpose of funerals is to give grieving parties a sense of closure. The funeral ritual typically includes remembering the life of the departed and saying final good-byes. Effective grieving in divorce requires the same. Remembering the life of a lost relationship in order to understand its failures and successes helps us alter the course for the future. Ultimately, this process allows us to detach, move on and say good-bye. And though often painful, it paves the way for new beginnings by allowing deceased relationships to forever rest in peace.