

Understanding the Grief of Fathers



When a child dies, each person grieves in their own way. However, men and women often grieve differently. Because this is common, it is important to understand some of the grief reactions of men.

“I was always taught that men don't cry. Men are the strong ones”.

Men often grow up learning that they need to be strong, provide for and protect their families. They may feel like being strong means they can't cry or show emotion. They may also feel that being strong means they need to be the one to take care of things. They feel the need to look like they “have it all together” for their partner and other children, yet they are torn apart inside because of their own grief. Sometimes, grieving fathers feel they are supposed to go on with life much sooner than they are ready to.

“I have a hard time talking about my feelings, but I really hurt. I miss my child”.

It may be very hard for you to share and talk about your feelings. Grieving fathers have said that they work at hiding their grief from others. It is common for men to be quiet. They may keep their thoughts to themselves and grieve when they are alone. Fathers sometimes speak about feeling alone and isolated. They have said that they want to share their feelings but won't say anything because they are afraid to upset others or cause more pain. An important part of the grieving process and of healing is to express your feelings and emotions. You can express your feelings by being active, by using your hands, by writing and many other ways that do not involve talking. Grieving is hard work. It is normal for your emotions to be confusing and overwhelming.

“All I hear is 'How is your wife?' I wish someone would ask how I am”!

You may find that few people ask how you are feeling after the death of your child. People may ask how your child's mother is doing or how your family is doing. It is as if people do not expect fathers to have the deep pain of grief.

It is helpful to talk with someone about your feelings. This may be a friend, co-worker, partner or another grieving parent. It may be helpful for you to talk with another father about his feelings and experiences after his child died. Some grieving couples find it helps to share their feelings with each other. Others have problems talking with each other. Be sure to remember that there is more than one way to grieve. Each person will grieve the death of a child in their own way.

“Everyone at work expects me to be the same person I was before. They think that if they don't talk about our baby, I'll be okay”.

“I thought that if I worked extra hours, it would help me forget. I think I tried to put my grief on hold”.

Many grieving fathers have talked about how hard it was to go back to work. Some fathers said there were a lot of questions and misunderstandings about the death of their child. Other's said there was a lot of silence. Often, friends and coworkers do not know what to do or what to say.

Some people may think that, since you are back at work, you are no longer feeling sadness and the pain of grief. They may not talk about your child because they do not want to make you feel sad. You may get angry or upset at your co-workers because you think they do not care. Most people want to help, but they just do not know how. Be prepared for this. It may be helpful to express your needs to those around you through a trusted co-worker or email. Have a plan on what you will say about the death. Have a general response ready for insensitive comments. Know it is your choice to talk about your loss and to whom you want share your thoughts and feelings with.

On the other hand, many grieving fathers have said how helpful their coworkers have been. Just having another person listen, express care and concern or share memories of your child can help you feel better.

Sometimes, grieving parents use work as an excuse to stay away from home and to avoid the feelings of grief. You may find it hard to go home and share your feelings with your partner. Or, you may feel you need time away from the house. Be sure to share these thoughts and feelings with your partner. This is a very hard time. Try to remember that sharing your feelings can help lessen the pain. Be gentle with yourself.

"I feel like I failed as a father." "I was looking forward to our first trip to the zoo."

The death of a child is the loss of many hopes and dreams. You may feel great pain and loss. It is natural to grieve the loss of the future you planned with your child. Because of our culture and society, you may find it hard to share these feelings. However, it does not mean these strong feelings are not present.

Some ideas to help you:

- Set aside time to think and reflect.
- Talk to a supportive family member or friend.
- Limit outside activities; grief can be very tiring.
- Build something.
- Cry.
- Express emotions constructively. Physical exercise, sports activities, walking or running are healthy outlets.
- Find a support group or other support system.

Other resources

- *Swallowed By a Snake* by Thomas Golden, 2000
- *Understanding Your Grief* by Dr. Alan Wolfelt, 2003
- <https://www.bereavedparentsusa.org/>
- <https://www.compassionatefriends.org/>

This sheet was created to help you care for your child or family member. It does not take the place of medical care. Talk with your healthcare provider for diagnosis, treatment and follow-up.