

The Grief of Fathers

by William Schatz

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"Why does it seem so difficult for a man to express his emotions?" "Why do men have difficulty crying?" "Why doesn't my husband grieve the way I do?" "Why doesn't Dad feel the way Mum and I do about the death of my brother?" These questions are frequently asked after the death of a child.

Although each person is unique, there are some generic tendencies in the way men handle their grief. This is due to their social conditioning process through adolescence and into adulthood. This conditioning of the American male - a recent topic in the literature of psychology and sociology - has been a powerful negative influence on the ability of men to express their grief openly. An examination of this process offers clarification of the difference in the approach to grieving by men and women. Not every father experiences identical reactions, but the thoughts expressed here have been confirmed by the testimonies of many bereaved fathers.

While growing up, the American male assumes certain roles modelled by his parents, teachers, relatives and friends. These roles, while necessary or useful in modern society, later can prohibit a healthy grief process. Let's identify and examine some of these roles to determine their impact on the grief process for men.

One role is that of MACHO-MAN, role-modelling which begins during boyhood with a message such as "Big boys don't cry" - a role reinforced in adulthood through movies, television and advertising media. It is also reinforced by females indoctrinated with the same conditioning. By adulthood, the macho role is usually accepted on an unconscious level.

After the death of a child, fathers as well as mothers have a desperate need to express the emotions of grief. Feelings of sadness are triggered by the obvious absence of the child, family events, memories, pictures and holidays. But when such moments occur, what outlets are available for a man to release his pent-up emotions? When he feels a lump in his throat or tears filling his eyes is he able to surrender to the tears and cry? - Probably not, especially if he is with someone else. His macho conditioning interferes, the tears are checked and attention is turned to some other activity. Society will accept a father's crying at the time of his child's death or at the memorial service or funeral, but not long afterwards.

There is a vast difference between the male and female grief response. A man sees his wife frequently crying, having 'blue days' and able to talk openly about her pain. In contrast, he may be irritable or angry and less able to verbalize his pain. There may be difficulties as they attempt to support and understand each other. She may see lack of openness as not caring. He may think there's something wrong with her because she's still crying after six or eight months, or that something is wrong with him because he's not showing the same emotional response as his wife. These differences, unless understood and discussed, can lead to additional problems in an already distressed marriage.

The macho role is frequently reinforced by friends who say "You really are handling this thing well"; "Keep a stiff upper lip"; "It's good to see you tucking up with all that's going on"; or "Someone has to be strong through this whole thing". These are indications of the social conditioning in others as they exhibit their role expectations of the grieving fathers.

Let's examine the role of PROTECTOR - One role men assume quite naturally as protector of wives, children and property. When dealing with the death of a child, a father can feel a sense of failure in this role.



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He shouldn't have given permission to his son to take the car! He should have called the doctor sooner! He shouldn't have let his daughter go to that party! He should have watched the baby closer!

Another role to consider is that of PROVIDER. This role commonly causes a father to return to work very soon after his child's death - long before the shock and numbness have worn off. He may feel isolated when fellow workers don't know what to say. He may have trouble concentrating on his work as he's trying to sort things out. Or he may deeply reinvest himself in his work, attempting to forget his loss. In a few weeks he may adjust to the work routine, but each night when he returns home, he finds the memories, the family in grief and the stark reality of the death of his child. He may find it increasingly difficult to come home and choose to escape through working overtime, stopping at the local bar for a drink, or getting involved in some service club activity - anything seems better than going home to the reminders of what has happened. Fathers might want to forget, but can't. This sometimes leads to extreme reactions, such as alcoholism or divorce.

The differences between men and women in this area are great. As men are returning to work and adjusting to the work routine, most women are staying at home, possibly with other children, to face the memories and painful reminders on a day-by-day, minute-by-minute basis. The result is that the mother is forced to work through her grief on a daily basis while the father is directing his energy toward his job, setting aside his grief work. At the end of a day, when his wife would like to share her feelings with him, he is tired from the struggle of the day and is freshly reminded of what's been going on while he's been away. He needs time to assimilate what's transpired in the family as well as what's happened inside of himself. In this area it is very difficult for parents to support each other, since both are in such need of caring and understanding.

The last role to be reviewed is that of the SELF-SUFFICIENT MAN. As a boy grows up, his parents encourage him to 'stand on your own two feet', 'learn to do it yourself'. Consequently, when it comes to coping with the death of his own child and the attendant grief, a man often feels he should be able to handle this alone, too. And so he struggles with his feelings and emotions and how to express them. It is not easy for him to share his feelings with his wife and certainly not with other men. If there is sharing with other men friends, it is on the surface rather than on an intimate basis. Men tend to discuss business achievements, sports, possessions, politics and hobbies. Men share about what they DO rather than about what they FEEL. When asked how he feels, the bereaved father often says "OK" though his stomach may be twisted in a knot. The need to maintain a self-sufficient posture often keeps fathers away from TCF meetings and the peer sharing - so therapeutic in the grief process. Professional help is also avoided in an effort to deny any dependency on others.

Women tend to be more open with other women. They network at social gatherings, at church or across the backyard fence. They usually have several 'best friends' with whom they can talk. Men just don't have that ability, so they keep their feelings bottled up. And because of the modelling process, if the father keeps feelings inside, then a son above the age of 8-10 years will probably keep things inside also.

Understanding the male conditioning and the impact it has on the grief process is very important for both spouses. But just as important is the need to convince men to accept their true feelings as normal,



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