



A FATHER'S GRIEF

Many strong emotions are aroused when a child dies, and the expression of these can be difficult, as well as different, for men and for women. Different ways of grieving can separate husbands and wives, instead of drawing them together. The father may think there is something wrong with the mother because she is still crying after ten or twelve months; or he may think there is something wrong with him because he is not. Many women cry frequently and are able to talk more openly about their feelings, whereas men may feel inhibited in expressing their emotions.

In most western cultures, the typical male role (learned from family and media) suggests that a man must be strong, should not show tenderness, softness or tears. This is often apparent within a family where many fathers (and grandfathers, uncles) do not cry. This is frequently reinforced by friends who may say "You really are coping very well – keep a stiff upper lip!" or "Someone has to be 'strong' through all this, it's good that you can carry on and look after all that needs to be done." It may be acceptable for a father to cry at the funeral service but not for much longer, at least in public. Few people realise that grieving the death of a son or daughter continues for a considerable time.

When his child dies, a father may feel that he has failed in the role of protector. He is also unable to shield his family from the pain of grief and, in attempting to cope with his family's needs; a father may suppress his own. This suppressed grief may show itself in irritability, bursts of unreasonable anger, etc., and may be interpreted as 'coldness' and 'lack of caring' by his family and friends.

Men usually share what they *do*, not what they *feel*. They do not find it easy to ask for help, whereas most women are more open with their emotions and able to share on a more intimate level with other women, either privately or in a group.

A man may have to return to work very soon after the funeral because he must continue to provide for his family. This can cause difficulties as the initial shock and numbness will not have worn off. He may feel isolated because his colleagues do not know what to say to him; jobs take longer to do because grieving is exhausting, and he may have trouble concentrating. Some employers are very understanding about a father's needs at this time. Bereaved fathers may throw themselves into their work with increased intensity in an attempt to forget the death of their child.

In a few weeks he may appear to have adjusted to a normal work routine, but the turmoil and anguish are still within him.

When he returns home each evening, he is assailed by the continuing reality of the family's loss, with each one grieving in their own way. The mother may have been struggling all day – coping with the other children and their needs, passing the empty bedroom, collecting brothers and sisters from the same school the child attended – and she is brimming over with the need to talk, to share, to weep. She may feel the father has 'escaped' from all the stresses of home to a place where he can relax with his colleagues, avoiding the searing memories which have buffeted her. She may be unaware of his difficulties both at work and in coming home, so does not understand that he may be unable to respond to her need at that moment.



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In the face of his child's death a father feels helpless and defeated, and may become angry and frustrated because there is no apparent outlet for these feelings. Most men like to have all things, including emotions, under control but when a child dies all routine and normality are gone. The feeling of hopelessness can be overwhelming and a father may look for ways to escape.

Grief is healed by bringing feelings to the surface where they can be talked about, understood and resolved. If those feelings are left buried they cause prolonged turmoil, bitterness, depression, family problems and even ill-health. Fathers, like all bereaved people, need to realise that it is necessary to grieve, and to 'be kind' to themselves.

To use restless activity as a way of escaping from grief is not helpful. Instead, try to be with the family and talk with them, discuss the differences in the way men and women grieve. Children may think that, because their mother is seen to express her grief more freely, she loved the child who died more than their father did; they may then see this difference as applying to themselves too.

Bereaved parents may find themselves now questioning all kinds of things – the meaning of life and of death, marriage, work, relationships of all kinds, religion and philosophy. Some people find it helpful to write their thoughts and feelings down, perhaps in the form of a diary or a notebook. There the anger, sorrow, resentments, remorse, love, sadness, can safely be poured out, and gradually these questions may be resolved. Looking back through the diary will show that this is slowly happening.

The natural anger and resentment over the death of his child may smolder on inside a father. It may be anger related directly to the cause of the child's death – the police, the hospital, the driver, the doctor. It may be a general kind of anger that lashes out at anything in its path. It may be anger with God.

One way of releasing anger safely is through physical energy. Vigorous sport is one way. Gardening or do-it-yourself are other safe outlets.

Try to find a friend with whom you can talk freely. One source of help is other bereaved fathers. The Compassionate Friends has group meetings in many areas and can put fathers who have suffered a similar loss in touch with each other (by visits, telephone or letter). Some groups may have a 'fathers-only' evening from time to time. TCF publishes a bi-monthly Newsletter, a range of leaflets and has many helpful books in its postal library.

The deep and very painful wound caused by the death of a child will heal over a period of time. But, as with a physical wound, the scar will remain. It is a life-long loss, and the child is never forgotten, nor can he or she be replaced. Gradually, however, the child takes a new place within the family and the memories and photographs, which at the beginning caused such pain and anguish, slowly become sources of healing and of comfort.