

## Fathers Grieve, Too

*For fathers who have experienced the death of a child*

People grieve in very different ways- even two parents who are grieving the death of the same child will have very different needs. Age, previous life experiences, personality, culture, and gender all affect how people grieve.

As a father, your experience may be very different from that of your spouse. Men and women tend to grieve differently. In our culture, women have more permission to cry and talk. Men are typically expected to “be strong” and not encouraged to openly express emotions. Support is often directed to the mother and most men quickly resume the perceived responsibility to “protect and provide” for the remaining family members.

Our culture perceives the father as the protector or provider of the family. When a child dies, many men feel they have “failed” in their role as a parent. Society is encouraging men to be strong, independent, and powerful. Therefore, most men are resistant to outside support because they believe it is in contrast to how that are “suppose” to behave.

**Talking:** Often men are perceived as “distant, out of touch, or not caring”. The fact that men often choose not to talk about their feelings doesn’t mean they don’t have feelings. Many are uncomfortable and apprehensive about how others might perceive or react to them. Men also have a tendency to THINK through their grief while women usually FEEL their way through grief. If you are apprehensive or uncomfortable talking about your feelings or sharing your experiences, you may want to do just a little sharing each day. Try talking to your wife, to another father who has had a child die, visit with your pastor, or identify a friend who you can trust. Talking may help you to lighten your pain, clear your anger, and affirm your feelings for your child who has died.

**Anger:** You have the right to be angry. Your child died. You may feel angry at yourself for not “protecting” your child, anger at the medical team or others involved in the care of your child or angry at God and the death of your child may cause you to challenge your beliefs. It is normal to be angry, but the challenge is for you to find a safe way to express your anger. If you find yourself directing it at those you love, or feeling angry longer than you want to, you may need to re-evaluate how you are sharing your anger.

**Working:** Many men struggle with returning to work. For many, financial burdens require them to return to work before they may be ready. Following the death of a child, it is easy to use work as a way to cover up your feelings. Sometimes, work can be a refuge and a relief. Many men may find themselves working more hours just to avoid their home, or their pain. You may work until you become overly tired just to try to help you sleep or you may use work to try to forget about your grief. Work can be a distraction and it can be a relief, but it is seldom a solution to the sadness. Some men may try to avoid returning to work, worrying about how co-workers or supervisors will respond to you. There may be some hesitation and fear about leaving your spouse or any surviving children home alone. It is also common to find yourself with less



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energy, easily forgetting things, more irritable, and in general, making more mistakes than before the death. The death of a child may cause men to rethink their job identity and result in a change of priorities.

**Your Relationship:** The death of a child can permanently alter a relationship. Men and women grieve differently. Individuals grieve differently. Therefore, it may be a struggle to communicate and to understand each other's needs. This can be difficult for couples, as each person in a marriage may grieve the death of the child in their own way. Recognizing these individual styles of grieving is the first step to accepting each other's needs and pain.

**Emotions:** Real men do cry! Whether it is through support groups, counseling, talking with friends, exercise, art, sharing memories, it is important that you find your own way of grieving and the caring people who can help you walk through your grief.

## Daddies Hurt Too

Daddies hurt, too  
We don't always see  
Just how much  
The pain is so deep

Daddies expected to be strong  
And carry on,  
While mommies may show heartache  
All the day long

He is just as crushed  
And devastated, too  
Why don't people recognize  
That Daddies hurt too?

Allow him to be human  
And to show his grief  
Be understanding...  
May he get some relief!

Be a support to Daddies  
When they lose a child or spouse

Just because a dad is off working  
He doesn't forget his love and loss  
Deep down inside  
Behind that very strong man  
Is a loving Daddy  
Who hurts so he can hardly stand

So show your love,  
Appreciation and grace  
For this Daddy who had tried  
To keep his child safe

Daddy carries this heavy burden  
Feeling failure, at best  
Because he could not keep his child  
From the final rest

So love him,  
Encourage him, and lift him up  
So he'll know we're here for him  
As he drinks from this bitter cup

Adapted from a poem written by Linda Camper in The Compassionate Friends newsletter



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