



Dads & Bereavement

HOW OUR CULTURE INFLUENCES THE WAY A MAN MOURNS & PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR SUPPORTING A GRIEVING FATHER.

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About the Author



Crystal Niehoff has been working with children and families since 1996, when she took her first job as a preschool teacher. In 1998, she licensed as a foster parent, a role she cherished. She continued her college studies, eventually earning degrees in Business Administration and Child Development. Then, in 2010, she continued her work in the child welfare system as a Crisis Specialist and Family Support Worker for a private foster care and adoption agency.

Crystal has been researching and writing on topics, such as: parenting, relationship building, foster care and adoption, since 2007. She has contributed articles to several of organizations, including: Suite101.com, RainbowKids Adoption & Child Welfare Advocacy, CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates for Children), and Bethany Christian Services. Recently, she has had work published in *From Reveille To Retreat: The Journey Of A Lifetime*, a handbook for the Army chaplain's spouse.

Her experience with pregnancy loss and stillbirth, both as a mother and a grandmother, led her to Stillbirthday. She credentialed as a Birth and Bereavement Doula, then Chaplain/ Midwife of Thanatology in 2014. Crystal feels that supporting families enduring pregnancy loss in any trimester is an honor, one which she holds near and dear to her heart.

Nowadays, you can also find her serving military families alongside her Army chaplain husband. She is a biological and adoptive mother of 5. Grandmother to 2 step-grandchildren, and 3 "butterfly" grandbabies. In addition to ministering to families and writing; Crystal is a speaker, fine art photographer, frequent traveler, and lover of great coffee.

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A note before we begin

Everyone--men, women and children--grieve differently and there are no right or wrong ways to grieve. As you read through this material, remember that I am simply giving you, the reader, insight into how a father may react to the loss of his child differently than the mother, and offer suggestions for validating his grief, and ministering to him as he mourns. Please also note that cultural expectations--society's definition of *feminine* and *masculine*--also contributes to how one processes grief.

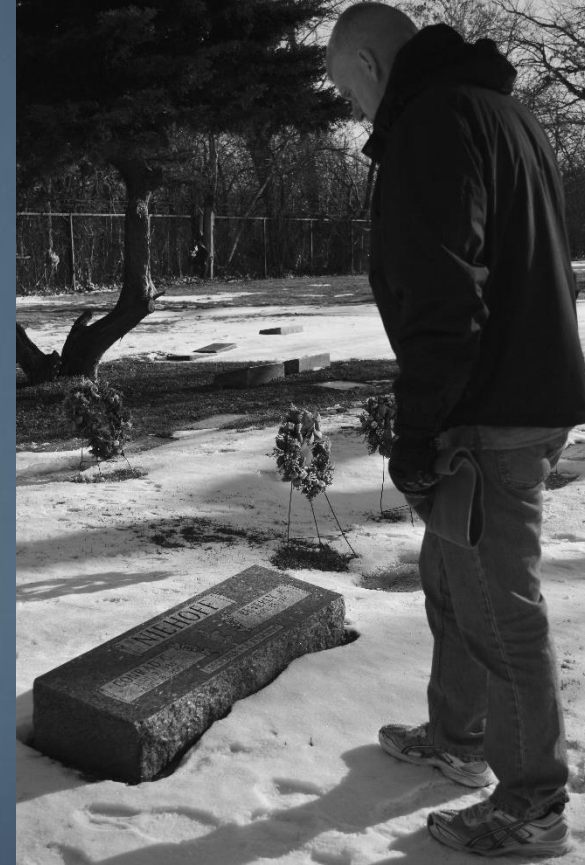
The Statistics

According to Hope Exchange at www.HopeExchange.com, research indicates that in the United States each year:

- ▶ *More than 500,000 pregnancies each year end in miscarriage (occurring during the first 20 weeks).*
- ▶ *Approximately 26,000 end in stillbirth (considered stillbirth after 20 weeks)*
- ▶ *Approximately 19,000 end in infant death during the first month.*
- ▶ *Approximately 39,000 end in infant death during the first year.*
- ▶ *An estimated 19% of the adult population has experienced the death of a child (this includes miscarriages through adult-aged children).*

The Statistics

When reading statistics such as these, often our first thought is for the mother. Yet, for every miscarriage, stillbirth, infant and child loss, there is also a father. Men may not experience pregnancy and child loss in as intimate a way as a mother does, but his grief is no less real, and the sting of death no less bitter. However, *how* a man copes with death may be much different from his female counterpart, and is heavily influenced by culture.



Modern Day Expectations of Men in Western Society

Although we have come a long way in changing our views regarding male/ female roles, society still holds certain expectations when it comes to how a man is to function in our in our culture.

For example, men are expected to:

- ▶ Be strong,
- ▶ Take charge,
- ▶ Solve problems,
- ▶ Refrain from showing emotions,
- ▶ Use self-restraint,
- ▶ Be independent,
- ▶ Show ambition,
- ▶ Use rationale, be a thinker,
- ▶ Play the role of the protector.

Men & Mourning in Our Culture

In the area of grief and mourning, society commonly expects that men will be strong, able to hold it together. While it is acceptable for a man may get angry, he must not cry or show *sensitive* emotions. Men are made to feel that they must *stuff* their feelings.

Because of these expectations, a father who has just lost his child may allow himself to feel anger, even display anger--after all, he is allowed to do that; however, he may not let himself cry, certainly not in front of others, including his wife.

Men & Mourning in Our Culture

Compounding the stresses of bereavement, and society's norms for how a father displays his mourning, a father is made to feel that he, alone, is the head of the family. The leader. The rock. He is supposed to be solid and stable, he can't break down or lose control. Given this presupposition, Dad may hide behind a mask of being *hard as a rock*, and distant, falsely thinking that he is behaving the way his family, and others, expect of him.

Men are also viewed as the protector of the family unit. A father may feel that the loss of the child was somehow his fault. He may even feel shame because he was expected to shield his family, yet was unable to stop the circumstances leading up to the death of their baby. Men are assumed to be problem solvers--to fix things--but Dad couldn't fix this, it was out of his control.

Men & Mourning in Our Culture

He feels helpless and chaotic, when expectations are that he is to be in control. He feels inadequate and weak, when he is expected to be intelligent, able to fix anything, and brave. And he may feel like a failure because he wasn't able to fulfill his protector role and shield his family from this tragedy of death.

Dad wants to live up to the expectations of his wife, his family and friends, and society, by being strong and in control, but the emotions of grief, anger, sadness, pain, confusion, denial, all come flooding in, threatening to overtake his rock solid demeanor. It's frightening to a man, all too often causing him to build an impenetrable wall in an effort to guard himself. Sometimes, he just needs permission to mourn according to his own needs, and know he hasn't lost his "man card."

A Father's Relationships During Bereavement

No doubt, bereavement tests even the strongest relationships. Marriages too often crumble after the death of a child. Existing children struggle with understanding why their normally kind, loving, patient parents are suddenly emotionally distant and short-tempered. Friends, work associates, and extended family members move on with life while it seems to grind to a halt for the bereaved.



A Father's Relationships During Bereavement

After the death of his beloved wife, C. S. Lewis reflected in his book, *A Grief Observed*:

"No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning. I keep on swallowing.

At other times it feels like being mildly drunk, or concussed. There is a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me. I find it hard to take in what anyone says. Or perhaps, hard to want to take it in. It is so uninteresting. Yet I want the others to be about me. I dread the moments when the house is empty. If only they would talk to one another and not to me."

A Father's Relationships During Bereavement

Fathers in the throes of grief are on a seemingly unending emotional rollercoaster, making relationships with everyone around them extraordinarily difficult. Take hope, however, if you know a father who is journeying through grief right now: husband, family member, friend, co-worker, or client, there are some very practical ways of providing support during his time of bereavement.

Ways to Provide Practical Support to a Bereaved Dad

▶ **Be a safe person.**

Let him express whatever emotions he wants to express--or doesn't want to express--and know that no one else will be privy to the conversation. If he gets angry, let him be angry. If he sits in silence, sit with him without offering explanations for the loss, or your opinion about how he should cope with it. If he cries, let him cry without letting yourself stiffen up and making him feel uncomfortable with his display of emotion.

▶ **Validate him.**

Even if you have never experienced a loss such as he has, and cannot understand what he is presently experiencing, let him know that what he is going through is normal and expected. Let Dad know that it's OK to feel what he is feeling. Is he angry at God? That's alright, God understands and God is big enough to handle Dad's anger. Is he a puddle of tears? Perfectly understandable. Is Dad not showing emotion? That, too, is OK. Whatever Dad is feeling, others who have walked the road of grief before him have felt the same way, too. It's OK, it's normal, and he has every reason to feel that way.

Ways to Provide Practical Support to a Bereaved Dad

- ▶ **Listen, just listen.**

The most practical piece of advice I can give to anyone who is coming alongside a client, friend or family member who is enduring the death of a loved one, is to simply *listen*. Let them say anything and everything and just be an ear for them. You don't need to offer explanations, even when they ask for them, because death doesn't really make sense. *Just listen*.

- ▶ **Be present.**

Be *present*, not only physically, but emotionally as well, to listen to Dad. Be present to just sit in the gulf of silence with him. Let him know you are there, and nothing at all has to be said, and no masks have to be worn in your presence.

Ways to Provide Practical Support to a Bereaved Dad

▶ **Don't judge.**

Feelings are not wrong, they are just feelings. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. As long as Dad isn't hurting himself or others, realize that he is processing through a traumatic event and that is exactly what he needs to do to find healing. Refrain from trite judgements that might shame him.

What Not to Say to a Grieving Father

Don't say:

- ▶ If only you would have had more faith...
- ▶ Well, at least you can try again.
- ▶ The baby is in a better place.
- ▶ You must have done something to make God mad.
- ▶ Get over it. Move on.
- ▶ It just wasn't God's will.



Ways to Provide Practical Support to a Bereaved Dad

What To Say to a Dad in Mourning

Do say:

- ▶ I love you.
- ▶ I'm praying for you.
- ▶ Would you like for me to.....
 - Take your son to ball practice along with us?
 - Walk your dog?
 - Pick something up for you while I'm at the store?
 - Babysit so you can spend time alone with your wife?
 - Mow your lawn?
 - Go to the funeral home with you? Meet with your pastor with you?

Do:

- ▶ Acknowledge the baby. Ask the child's name. Give validation to the child's life, though brief.
- ▶ Allow him to tell you about the pregnancy and the good times enjoyed before the loss.

Other Ways to Help

- ▶ Attend the funeral or memorial service in show of support.
- ▶ Send a heartfelt note.
- ▶ Call and check in on him. See if he would like to go for coffee/ golfing/ fishing/ jogging.
- ▶ Funeral/ burial expenses can be overwhelming. Try to help raise money to offset some of those expenses for the family.
- ▶ Visit the gravesite with him.
- ▶ Help Dad find resources:
 - Relevant books, or other material.
 - Grief support group (offer to go with him initially).
 - Pastoral counseling
 - Professional therapy

Other Ways to Help



Crystal Images Photography

Find ways to memorialize his child:

Leave flowers/ note at the grave.

Gift a concrete statue to sit at the grave site or cement vase to hold flowers.

Donate money to a charity in honor of their baby (in the child's name).

Plant a tree in the baby's honor.

Donate children's books to the local library in the child's name.

Create a memorial website for the baby.

Donate items to a NICU, pregnancy resource center, or children's home in the child's honor.

Send a "Thinking of You" card on the day the baby was due or first holiday after the child's passing.

Other Ways to Help

When Dad is ready, invite him to join you....

- For a weekend fishing trip.
- On a men's church retreat.
- For a family day at the beach.
- To attend a marriage seminar.

When he is ready, let him know it's OK to be happy and hopeful again.

"Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy." ~ John 16:2



Three Tools For Your Support Toolbox

Remember....

There is no timetable for grief. Typically, it is said that the first year is the hardest, especially around the time of the “missed firsts”: the first Christmas, first Father’s Day, what would have been the child’s birthday or due date, the first anniversary of the baby’s passing, and so forth.

However, men may not really begin to grieve until a year and a half to three years later. This could be, in part, because fathers remain emotionally strong during the worst period of mourning for the sake of their families. Once his wife begins to get stronger, he may then begin to let go and more fully grieve for his child. It is important for his wife, and those around him, to understand that he now needs to be allowed his time of mourning.

With this in mind, there are 3 important tools you should always have in your support toolbox when supporting a bereaved father.....

Three Tools For Your Support Toolbox

1. **Patience.** Give Dad time and space to grieve. Grieving doesn't stop once the funeral is over and extended family go back home. Grieving takes time. Dad may be doing well one day but on a roller coaster of emotions the next. Be patient, show patience.
2. **Acceptance.** Accept that he is going through a difficult time, and accept where he is emotionally at any given point in his grieving process.
3. **Love.** Show unconditional love to Dad, knowing a bereaved father may (and likely will) say and do things that seem irrational, emotional, and deviates from the cultural norm. Let him know that he is loved and accepted regardless.

Three Tools For Your Support Toolbox

There is an old adage that time heals all wounds. To be honest, this is not altogether true. However, with time, the grieving father transitions to a new normal, a new way of living his life without his child, and learns to utilize coping mechanisms that help him to cope with the sting of death. He begins to smile and laugh again. He begins to allow himself to enjoy activities he once denied himself during his mourning period. He begins to reconnect with family and friends and engage in those relationships again. Time itself doesn't heal, but time does give way to hope, and that hope allows Dad to move forward into that new normal.



“If I had lost a leg, I would tell them, instead of a boy, no one would ever ask me if I was ‘over’ it. They would ask me how I was doing learning to walk without my leg. I was learning to walk and to breath and to live without Wade. And what I was learning is that it was never going to be the life I had before.”

~ Elizabeth Edwards

Credits

Chaplain (Major) Kevin Niehoff, United States Army, Contributor

Miscarriage Statistics, Hope Exchange, <http://www.hopexchange.com/Statistics.htm>

Photo Credits

Slide 2, © Patty Patterson, Artistic Images

Slide 6, Man Beside Headstone, © Crystal Niehoff, Crystal Images Photography

Slide 11, Family Sitting On Bench Overlooking Lake, © Crystal Niehoff, Crystal Images Photography

Slide 16, St. Patrick's Church Steeple Cross, © Crystal Niehoff, Crystal Images Photography

Slide 19, Cherub of New Post Chapel, © Crystal Niehoff, Crystal Images Photography

Slide 20, Dandelion, © Crystal Niehoff, Crystal Images Photography