

A FATHER'S GRIEF

“Fix-it Daddy” my son, chuck, would say as a little boy, bringing me some broken toy. Over the years I fixed the broken toys, the malfunctioning appliances, the ailing automobiles, the carpentry projects, etc. But in July of 1979, I came up against something I didn't know how to repair – a broken heart after the death of my son in an automobile accident. Dad, the fix-it man, had an insoluble problem. There was no way to make it better for myself or anyone else in the family.

After the numbness and shock wore off, I began to realize that he was really dead and all the bright hopes and expectations for the future were gone with him. The terrible pain of grief and a sense of helplessness set in. There were feelings of anger, frustration, guilt, trouble concentrating at work, and wanting to escape but not knowing where to escape to. I tried to bottle-up my emotions and be strong. I postponed my grief due to concern for other members of the family.

For men of my age group and often younger men, too, conditioning has given us an image of being male: Men should be strong – “big boys don't cry;” the male is the protector of the family, the provider, the problem solver and he should be self-sufficient and able to handle everything on his own; displays of emotion are taboo, even among close friends and family. When a man loses his child, these expectations are unrealistic and superhuman.

In October we began going to Bereaved Parent meetings. The outcry of another father hit home: “What is a father to do? You can't sit at your desk and cry.” At the meetings we heard a different approach. Rev. Simon Stephens, who founded The Compassionate Friends, said, “Grief only becomes a tolerable and creative experience when love enables it to be shared with someone who really understands.” From our support group leaders we heard things like: “Grief work is the hardest work you will ever have to do. Lean into the pain. You cannot go over, under or around grief, but only through it. We did not have any choice about what happened to our child, but we do have a choice about recovering from our grief.”

We learned a lot about grief. Everything we learned indicated it is much healthier to admit to and talk about our feelings than it is to deny them. Suppressed or unresolved grief surfaces in one way or another. It can be physical ailments, such as high blood pressure, stomach disorders and heart complications, or it can result in divorce, dependence on drugs or alcohol, or mental illness.

Admitting that we need help and support, that we don't have all the answers, that our power is limited and that we are in emotional pain is hard – especially for fathers. The grieving process is exhausting and frightening. It must be faced at a time when all our physical and emotional resources are at an all-time low. Most of us believe that we are in control of our own lives and our children's destiny, and it is a terrible realization when we find out we are not.

There is no timetable for grief. Your grief may be longer or shorter than mine. As the sixth anniversary of my son's death approaches, I can say that the raw wound has become a scar I can live with. How and when did I get there? What is a father to do? I am not really sure what the process was, and it happened gradually, almost imperceptibly. I know that being a part of the Bereaved Support Group was responsible for much of my recovery. How did sitting in a circle of people listening to all their pain help? I don't understand how, but in some way letting others' in enables you to let your own out. With the help of some very good friends, I have been able to get to the place where I can spend more time thinking about what I have left than focusing on what I have lost. I still feel cheated at times because I don't have my son, but life is worth living again.

Fathers hurt, too. We need to be allowed to be human. We need the chance to travel through our grief with the support of others. You are not alone. I have been there and so have many others. Sharing the burden lightens the load.

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by Owen Peltier*