



Children's National™

Chaplaincy Services



**The
Difference
With Dads**

When a child dies everyone who has known and loved that child grieves. Some of those people are women; some of them are men.

Gender is a significant contributor to the ways we grieve.

Societal (including family, friends, church, and ethnic/racial background) traditions and expectations influence the ways we live our lives through ordinary time, and in the times of great celebration and great crisis.

We can not predict with certainty how any individual will manage their grieving processes, but there are some general ways to understand the differences between the way women and men sorrow, learn, grow and integrate the tragic death of a child into their living.



*Those who will not slip beneath
the still surface of the well of grief
turning downward through its black
water
to the place we cannot breathe
will never know the source from which we
drink,
the secret water, cold and clear,
nor find in the darkness glimmering
the small round coins
thrown away by those who wished for
something else.*

—By David Whyte

**The next pages will share some information of the differing ways
men grieve their deepest hurts and losses.**

Male Grief Tends to Have Four Main Characteristics

Moderated Feelings:

Men have very deep feelings, but may not express them openly. Rather than sorrow, the more readily available feeling is anger. Men tend to cope with their “real” feelings by redirecting their energies to problem solving, physical activity, or family tasks others may consider less important in the immediacy of loss/death.

Cognitive Experience:

Men may work more with cognitive explanations of their grief. They may want medical details: what happened - how did it happen - why did it happen? They may want to know how a procedure worked or didn't work.

Problem-Focused Activity:

Men may tend to look for problems to solve or treat the events surrounding an

illness, injury, death, funeral as problems to be worked at, worked out.

Desire for Solitude:

Most men do not seek support from outside sources, such as support groups. They tend to want to master their own feelings. This doesn't mean that they don't feel things strongly - that they “get over” a loss quickly. Men struggle with grieving, especially the death of a child, for all of their lives. However, they may tend to do so privately - seeking alone time or conversation with a well-trusted friend. Some men may begin a new “project” - building something, taking up a new sport - as a way to physically express some of their feelings as well as to do something “practical.”

Other Research and feedback from men themselves indicates that after a major loss men are more likely than women to:

- Need more time to process their thoughts and emotions
- Feel the loss deeply but also feel that no words will express their experience
- Be somewhat embarrassed and sometimes fearful of their own feelings, worrying that if they begin to express them they may not be able to control them
- Move in and out of their grief more comfortably than women do - largely due to their focus on tasks
- Feel more angry than sad for longer periods of time than women tend to do
- Deeply dislike feeling powerless in the face of their loss and others' grief

Suggestions from Men to Men Who are Facing Loss, Pain, and Grief

As you look after others, look after yourself properly too. Eat well, get enough exercise and sleep, don't drink too much and avoid drugs that numb your experience. Find physical expressions for strong internal feelings, like walking, running, sport, mowing lawns, swimming, a punching bag, gardening, cycling, hammering, building something. Sit down and tell the people you are closest to you what you need - for example, some time out alone, or to keep feelings private. If this is too hard, write your needs as a list and show them. Keep communicating with those closest to you - both listening and talking. Ask them what they most need as they grieve, too.

Be creative together about the ways you can support each other and respect each other's way of grieving.

Keep in touch with friends, talk to them when you need to.

Take time out in nature - experience the cycle of birth and dying as natural.

Some men find it helpful to undertake a project or ritual to help them - creating something, planting a tree in memory of their child, writing a letter to your child who has died, re-reading a favorite bedtime story, keeping a picture tucked in a breast pocket. . . .

Taking time to do something you enjoy - once every day.

Suggestions for Women who Care for Men who are Grieving

THE FLUTE PLAYER

Long ago and far away there was a village at the edge of the jungle. It was a peaceable place except for one thing: a boa constrictor. This boa was huge, and could swallow a human easily. And, unfortunately, often did.

One day in the village a woman was speaking about her losses to the boa's appetite - it had eaten two of her children. Who, she wondered, could end this terror? Her hope was that the men, women, and children of the village could live in peace.

A man listened to her. He was the one in the village who played the flute most beautifully. He knew something must be done. He packed a bundle of corn, a small knife, and entered the jungle - playing his flute as he walked.

He sat, continuing to play. The boa approached. The man knew the boa was there but nevertheless continued to play a sweet and sad melody. The boa swallowed him in one bite. The flute player made himself as comfortable as he could. He took out his small knife and cut away at the snake's belly. The boa reacted to such pain by trying to make as much room for the flute player as possible.

The flute player knew it would take a long time to kill this enormous snake. Each time the flute player got hungry he cut away a small bit of the snake's flesh to eat. This went on for a long time; the snake was constantly in pain. After awhile the flute player came to the snake's heart. When he cut into the heart the snake died. The flute player returned to the village and told his friends that the boa was dead - and he showed them a piece of the heart to prove it.

Going into grief is like being eaten by a snake. We are cut off from our everyday life, we feel that our existence is confined, and we are surrounded by something dangerous and deadly - as was the flute player. Our world is completely changed. And we are so constricted by our grief that we sometimes feel we must conform to it always and in all ways. It seems there is no way out.

The flute player knew his task was not a short-term project - but that eventually he would come to "the heart of the matter." With grief we need to be prepared for a

long and complicated endeavor. Like the flute player we need to carve away at it a little at a time.

And, like the flute player, in the belly of the boa, we need to learn a different way of living. Our familiar skills and gifts may not meet the need - we may need to call on different aspects of ourselves that are not our usually strengths.

Eventually - we come out - changed, but whole.

(credit to Tom Golden Swallowed by a Snake)

Despite the differences between the way men and women tend to grieve, the stresses of grief for both are the same. There are no rules about grieving. It's not a race or competition. Grieving differently doesn't mean that the child who died was loved less, or that this person is better - or worse - at grieving. The way we grieve is as individual as each human being.

However we each get through our loss, all of us - whatever our gender - need the respect, understanding and patience of others to grieve in our own way, without guilt or disapproval, for as long as we need to.

Simon - 38 - a bereaved father

