

# For Fathers

## *The Myth of Silence*

The modern image of a man has certainly evolved from our culture. More and more we have seen an enigma on how a 'man' is supposed to behave. Long gone is the image of yesteryears of a man off to work and wife stays at home tending to household duties and mothering the children. Fatherhood seemed to be somewhat more of a hat or a role that men put on. Children approached dad as they would approach a boss or manager. Social rules were more defined and clear cut. It was well known how children were to behave around parents, how women were to behave in front of men and, in retrospect, how men behave toward women and children.

Over the years, we have literally seen an evolution, a shifting of social expectations between men and women. More women have gone out into the work force, become co-workers with fellow men. We have seen more men participating and being active in the home. However, there is still a paradigm that still has not followed the tide as closely despite the age of information that has been passed down. There is still a stereotype that plagues men despite our modernization. To this very day, tears are still considered as a sign of weakness. Still prevalent is the myth of the 'strong silent type'. Media still shows successful, virile heroes as masculine anyone who is able to face any situation head on with either rational or excessive violent passion. All we need to consider are past blockbusters as the Rambo and Rocky series, the popular Schwarzenegger films, Braveheart and more recently 300. However, submitting to such stereotype also may cause conflict, not only within ourselves, but with our significant other.

When grieving the loss of your baby, it is natural to want to 'keep it together' for the sake of our partner. And that is certainly a plausible cause. However, grief is patient, and if left unattended, will rear her embrace soon enough. Infact, it is reported that the average man usually experiences the severe pangs of grief six months after the initial event. This is partly due to our setting aside our own feelings to take care of and protect the mother and any bereaved children. This is okay, as we are instinctively hardwired to protect our family in such a manner. But heed the warning, do not ignore the grief. In fact, I would encourage embracing it as quickly as possible. To accept your loss is not about trying to block the loss out of your mind. Instead, it has to do with realizing that the loss will change your world, and that you're still meant to have a whole and healthy life in this new and different world. This new world is composed of a new 'normal', one without your baby. You can identify all your losses in your brain, but true grieving requires you to use your heart.

To be silent may be golden, but to stay silent may be costly. Love's natural tendency is to flow outwardly with expressions such as smiles, kisses, touch and comfort. Grief is also one that has a natural nature, one of sorrow, loneliness and isolation. But the healing process is the voice and crying of sorrow and pain. A man needn't feel ashamed of the tears shed, for every tear that I have shed for the loss of my little girl was the result of my love for little Zoe. What father doesn't share a special place for a much-loved, much-wanted child? A tear shed before your partner serves to confirm that she is not alone in her grief and sorrow; that this is not just a bad dream to awaken from, but reality that you are willing to walk through with her.

Indeed, a man's courage and strength is not measured by how strong and silent he remains, but his strength is measured by the compassion and tears he is able to share. The shortest verse found in the Bible is located in John 11 verse 35 where only two words are written, "Jesus wept". Whether you believe that He is fact or fiction is immaterial, the fact is that entire civilizations, laws, moral compasses and teachings were formed based on this Man. Certainly, if He was able to shed a tear, I can too.

### *How We Might Be*

Grieving is a way to put our world back together. Grieving heals the open wounds left by the death of our baby. This healing comes about by the expression of emotion and talking. Emotion left buried stagnates and festers. Unresolved grief may cause serious emotional and physical problems. Many men have to and must re-learn roles, which will encourage expression of grief. These re-learned roles include:

*Talk to Your Family.* Don't leave your wife out. As mentioned before, two may bear the stone of grief much easier than one. Spend time together with her and your other children. Let them know you are doing what you are able to do; that you want them to help.

*Have Quality Alone Time.* Sort out the millions of questions tumbling about in your mind. Think about your loss. Figure out the what's and why's. Gradually answers will come. Consider the use of a journal and write down your thoughts. As the days go by, read what was written before.

*Decrease Social Activities.* Many men will look for new hobbies or social activities. This only serves to take time away from grief work. Back off from added responsibilities. Remember, you really cannot back away from your emotions. Give yourself the time that is needed for grief work.

*Cry.* Crying is an effective way of dealing with the painful emotions of grief. Many men will have difficulty with crying. It may be okay to do so during the funeral, but what about at home? Don't suppress the lump in your throat or tears that want to come. Crying actually makes one feel better as though some tension has been released from within the body.

*Anger.* Express your anger in constructive ways. Ignoring or denying anger does not make it go away. It is difficult to decide with whom to be angry: your wife, the doctor? None of you deserve any blame. Some have said that it is okay to be angry with God, that He is big enough to take it.

There are many ways to express anger in physical ways that are not harmful to yourself or others. Exercise is one. Body movement and the awareness of how you feel during such movement may be helpful.

*Find a Support System.* This could be the hardest thing for a man to do. To admit to others that he needs help. It may be easier to do if you look for other bereaved fathers who have gone through the same thing you are now experiencing. Parent support meetings may also help to see how other families in various stages of grief are coping. What a support group can give to you is the knowledge that you are not alone – others have been there also.

### *How We Know We Are Making It*

"Time heals all" is a common cliché that is heard. This is true only in part. Time, work and knowledge help to heal. So, how do you know you're getting better? The following are some ways to assess the outcomes of your grief work.

- You become less introverted. You look outside of yourself and see how others in your family are dealing with the loss.
- You are able to live with yourself and the emotions within you. You learn more about yourself and the intensity of emotion is lessened.
- You have times without emotional stress. There is freedom of thought and joy in thinking about other things. This should not make you feel guilty; you are not betraying the memory of your child – simply learning to live with it.

- You become more comfortable with your grief. Ups and downs begin to stabilize and you are able to talk about your loss.
- You begin to feel less depressed. Depression may manifest itself as anger, anxiety, indecision, helplessness, and physical disturbances. Do not confuse sadness with depression. Sadness does not disturb your daily activities.
- You begin to act in traditional manly ways. You become surer of yourself. The concern is that these male roles do not become a shell to protect from the pain and grief.
- You realize that you and your wife did your best. There is no blame.
- You begin to see meaning in life. You begin to laugh and enjoy life.

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