

For Men Only

by David Delgadillo, SIDS Father

My son died of something that is called Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. Twenty seven days before he died, I was proud. Our first child and this little creature of God was a boy. Now, I had told my wife, "It really doesn't matter—boy or girl—I'll be happy with either." But you know, it did matter. In my mind I saw a son to carry my name—and a part of me—on through the years. I had a son to do things that other fathers do with their sons: explore, baseball, camping, man-to-man talks and so much more.

Then the terrible happened. On a cool September evening he left. Strange, to come into this world struggling and crying only to leave it without so much as a whisper of a shadow. For the remainder of that evening my heart was purged of feeling. Shock at the unthinkable—a baby had died.

That night was simply a prelude to the grief work which was to come. Grief, in part of its manifestations, forces a man to look at himself. He questions who and what he is. He attempts to deal with the loss the best he knows how. Many times the best he knows interferes with his life and the lives of those around him. In part the following is a story of men, a story of thinking about the dead and the living—and choosing.

How We Get to What We Are

It has been said that 99% of humankind's existence on earth has been spent hunting or gathering. Man's job is to go on the hunt, woman's is to care for the children. The Industrial Revolution is relatively recent in the scheme of life. Perhaps our history may help to explain in part why men deal with grief differently than women.

Little boys and girls are treated differently as they grow. Boys are encouraged to enter competitive competitions, to learn how to take and to be the King of the Mountain. Boys are Ninja Turtles and Space Heroes. Girls learn to take care of Barbie and her various belongings. They learn social skills much sooner than little boys. Little girls are allowed to cry more often than the "little man of the house".

Children also learn from observation. They see many examples of "do as I say and not as I do". They learn that mothers may weep while fathers remain stoic and guide the family through crisis. It is true that times are changing, nevertheless, the force of culture is quite persuasive when it comes to raising our children. If we take a close look at our values we find that they are conservative and similar to those of our parents. The point of all of this is that parents do raise their children with differing expectations and outlooks for their children's future.

How We Are Now

I spoke to some fathers whose children died of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. One, upon returning to home from his daily job, would begin to work again. He was building an addition to the house. To bed after midnight and up in the morning for more of the same. With a smile he related how he had completed the addition in less than a month. "We had a nice new room, but I still hurt inside". Another father remained quiet about his grief. He cared for his family and wife. Outwardly he remained above the pain. But, in the morning, while driving to work, he would park his car and cry. Both fathers alone in their grief—not letting anyone enter.

Men are taught both in word and example to be a certain way while they are small children. Those values become roles and ways of behavior in the adult male. They include: stoicism, competition, protector and provider for the family, problem solver, controller of environment and emotions and to be self-sufficient. The death of a child may affect all these roles in adverse ways. Stoicism increases, guilt is magnified, self-esteem is crushed and control is lost.

By way of contrast, most women are more open with their emotions and are able to share feelings on an intimate level. They have friends with whom to talk. Women will accept counseling more easily than men. Women are usually able to do their grief work readily while men struggle from one level to the next.

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 child. 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 relearn roles which will encourage the expression of grief. These relearned roles include:

- **Talk to Your Family**

Don't leave your wife out. As mentioned above, 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 "Whys". 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 memories. 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.

Express 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. Neither wife, paramedics, nurse nor doctors caused the death of a SIDS baby. Some have said that it is okay to be angry with God, that He or She is big enough to take it. Speak with those involved with the care and transport of your baby. Let them know how you felt about their attitudes both positive and negative.

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

Find a Support System

This could be the hardest for a man to do. To admit to others that he needs help. I think it is easier to do if you look for other bereaved fathers. 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 gives to you is the knowledge that you are not alone—others have been there also.

How We Know We're 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 inward. You look out 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 more sure of yourself. The concern is that these male roles do not become a shell to protect from the pain of 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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