

## A Father's Grief

*by Phillip Nielsen*

A father's grief often is expressed differently than a mother's, due in part, to society's expectations of men.

When a baby dies suddenly and unexpectedly, his or her family is left to struggle with feelings of shock, agony, emptiness, anger, guilt, loss and despair. A baby's death is a painful, almost unendurable event. It has an impact on individuals as well as on relationships. How each family member reacts to the loss is, in part, determined by the individual's life experiences, relationship with the baby and the environment in which he or she lives. While there is no prescribed road map for grieving family members, there is a universal belief people need to acknowledge and experience the emotional aspects of the loss in order to come to some sense of resolution.

J. William Worden, a professor of Psychology at Harvard Medical School, describes four tasks of mourning: 1) acceptance of the loss; 2) working through the pain of the grief; 3) adjustment to the environment in which the deceased is missing; and 4) emotionally relocating the deceased and moving on with life.

These tasks are the same for mothers and fathers. However, how they express their grief depends in part on society's expectations of them. Men are taught to not talk about their emotions, which can cause problems in their relationships. The most common complaint among couples is a lack of communication.

According to Carol Staudacher, author of the book *Men and Grief*, "The majority of men react to the death of a loved one by keeping their thoughts and emotional pain to themselves most, if not all, of the time." This lack of communication, although endorsed by society, makes it difficult for partners to support each other. There is an expectation within the relationship that couples will be able to share their thoughts and be able to openly express their feelings and emotions. If this does not happen, distance between partners can occur, resulting in a strain on the relationship. Couples need to acknowledge society's messages related to gender and discuss the impact of those messages on their own expressions of grief and loss. They also should talk about ways to communicate when words fail.

Last April, members of the men's grief group at the WSIDC Family Conference in Oconomowoc discussed their thoughts and emotions as they related to the death of their children. Much of the time, these men talked about the impact their baby's death had on their sense of competence as fathers and partners. They described their emotional devastation and their struggles to support their partners as well as care for themselves.

They also expressed frustration at the expectations society seems to place on them. They felt neither their grief nor their need to express themselves was acknowledged. While it often is not socially acceptable for men to express themselves, many of these men felt they were treated as if they were not as affected as others if they did not talk openly.

Society expects men to be providers, protectors and fixers and to be in control. Cultural and familial expectations create verbal and non-verbal messages that prescribe how men should react after the death of a child. One such message, "Big boys don't cry," implies men should not talk about their emotional needs. Even the questions men are asked after their child's death focus on their role of caring for their partner. For example, "How is your wife doing?" or "How is the family holding up?" These questions reinforce the assumption fathers do not have emotional needs or permission to talk about their feelings and that a father's role is to place the needs of his family above his own.

In most cases, men are more comfortable taking action than talking about their emotions. In the neonatal intensive care unit where I work, I have observed fathers struggling with their baby's hospitalization. They talk about processing their feelings and emotions by chopping wood, going for a walk or run or by doing other things alone that require strenuous, physical activity. Many men may need some time alone to process their feelings before they can discuss them.

The inability of men to verbally express their pain and emotional reactions should not be taken as a sign that they suffers any less. It is, in part, society's gender role expectations. We need to give fathers permission to grieve in their own ways and understand society may determine how comfortable they are expressing their pain and feelings of loss.