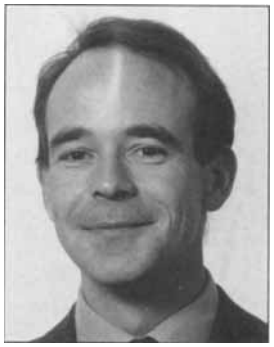
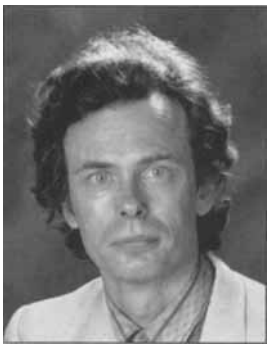
Working with bereaved fathers



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In the summer of 1990 Exploring Parenthood was approached by Jonathan Lloyd, Principal Social Worker at St Christopher's Hospice in South London. He was concerned that, while bereaved mothers frequently took up the offer of individual counselling, bereaved fathers, although desperately in need of help, appeared to be unable and unwilling to use the counselling service.

SUFFERING IN SILENCE

In our early discussions we agreed that the men's reluctance to receive help could be due to a number of factors. Feelings associated with death, as with birth, might seem to be a female domain. For many men, talking about their feelings is very difficult. Revealing vulnerability may be considered as weakness and something to be avoided. Men are practical, want to fix things and find solutions, so would avoid the 'working through' of the grieving process. As a result many fathers were suffering in silence and needed help.

We decided to offer a one-off workshop run by men, in which we stress the importance of men working with men on a male agenda. Initially we felt that one workshop would be the most appropriate offer, and we did not envisage a continuing programme.

The first workshop, planned for the first Sunday in October, was to take place at St Christopher's as the hospice, although a predominantly female environment, was familiar and secure. We chose a Sunday as the most convenient day for working fathers. We offered a creche, but all the participants were able to find alternative child care.

First workshop

The use of the term 'workshop' implies a programme of action, which we thought would be less threatening and more attractive than a 'talking session'. All the workshop facilitators were male and the agenda for the afternoon focused solely on the male perception.

The response was encouraging, since of the 18 men invited, 15 arrived. Their occupations were wide-ranging and included managers, medical consultants, manual workers and a driving instructor. They had all been bereaved within the previous year, the most recent within three weeks, and nine within six months. In total they had 28 children, with ages ranging from 18 months to 19 years. Only nine children were over 11.

The fathers addressed three themes: grief and the grieving process; parenting alone; and change and parenting. They also had an opportunity to reflect on how they perceived themselves at that point, and where to go from there.

The themes raised a number of common issues. The men felt a deep sense of isolation and that no one understood. 'They ask "how are you?" What can you say?, so you say you are fine.' The fathers felt that in general men were more isolated than women, who tend to have wider networks and are more ready to express and talk about their feelings. The men felt sad, depressed, had poor concentration and felt disorganised, but said 'we have so much to do, we don't have time to feel'. There was a view that work and home life had to be kept separate and that there were separate network systems. Fathering was undervalued in the workplace, but returning to work was, in part, a relief, an escape.

Parenting alone raised various issues. There was the need to carry on as normal, but the practical arrangements and school holidays were 'a nightmare'. Fathers found they had to rely on the older children to take a more active domestic role, and relied heavily on the extended family in caring for the younger children. This reliance on others brought out expressions of guilt and inadequacy.

Dealing with the feelings in the family was difficult and complex for the bereaved. It was hard to share

EDITOR'S NOTE

Exploring Parenthood is an independent voluntary organisation that works to promote the interests of parents and to raise the status of parenthood. It produces publications, provides advice, education, information and counselling, and runs research programmes designed to meet parents' needs for support, like the Bereaved Fathers' Group reported here. From the Editor's experience of leading Widowed Parents' Circles, she agrees that separate groups for men and women at least in the early stages of bereavement enable more widowed fathers to participate. It would be of interest to see whether the introduction of male and female co-leaders would add a helpful dimension at a later stage. The particular model put forward here evolved as a response to the way the widowed fathers perceived their needs, after an initial approach by the organisation. What is now needed is a controlled study of different models so that the optimum way of supporting widowed fathers in their task of parenting can be ascertained. The finding that most men had begun new relationships within the first year of bereavement contrasts with the finding that only 3 per cent of widowed mothers remarry.

feelings within the family. Daughters would cry on Dad's shoulder, but the fathers felt they had to be strong and not show their own grief, 'as it might upset or harm the children'. Sons often presented another dilemma. They were unable to show their feelings easily, and when they did this often led to conflict, acting out, and blaming Dad. It was very hard to explain what had happened to the young children.

There were problems over discipline. The role of disciplinarian had often previously been the wife's responsibility. 'She knew where the children were, what they did.' The fathers found discipline difficult because, in their upset state, their attempts at control could quickly lead to anger and conflict.

In focusing on these issues we asked two questions: do you need to be strong, or do you need to be honest? If boys don't or can't cry, is this a bereavement problem or a gender problem? Do boys not cry because Dad doesn't cry?

The workshop provided an opportunity for reflection, exchange of views and feelings, and an opportunity to share experience. The response was positive, though the very recently bereaved men found the workshop difficult to manage at times and were unable to join in some of the discussions.

Second workshop

The fathers asked for a second workshop to explore communication with their children and this was arranged three months later, in January. Ten participants arrived for 'Communicating with Children'. The non-attenders from the previous workshop were the fathers with older children.

The structure of the programme was similar to the first workshop and our intention was to stress that children are people not problems. We introduced the topic by asking the fathers what made their children special for them, and what were the communication issues between them and their children.

A number of concerns and issues emerged. The real problems were explaining the death to young children. What words should you use with little children so that they would understand? How do you know that they know what has happened?

There was much discussion about the day-to-day problems of communicating with very young children. This had been mainly the mother's domain and she had been the principal communicator.

These concerns were part of general feelings of doubt about being able to be a 'good enough' parent and father, and the skills needed. There was a general sense of anxiety about this and the problems involved in taking on the role of two parents. This anxiety extended to the fathers' concern about how they were perceived by others, and there was a sense of being judged by family, friends, neighbours and teachers. Some of the fathers found it difficult to be comfortable in the predominantly female worlds of the nursery, playgroup and school. They felt somewhat excluded, 'an outsider', as often they were the only man. It was difficult when other mothers asked the bereaved child: 'Where is your Mummy then?'

The other theme that emerged was the need to identify what is a father, what is a parent and what specific things do men bring to parenting?

At the end of the day, the fathers were very clear about how useful they had found the workshop, and we considered whether a further one was needed. We did not have an agenda or programme of workshops; we were in a dialogue with the men to find solutions that were appropriate for them. They were unclear about what they might need in the future, so no firm arrangements were made.

Third workshop

Several months later we thought it might be interesting to hold a third event entitled 'Moving On' to see what had happened to our group, what had helped them, and, at their request, to look at the question of new relationships.

Not all members of the group were able to attend, but the meeting turned out to be a free-flowing and stimulating discussion. The men had clearly moved on and there were new realignments in their lives. They felt more relaxed at home and at work, and the need to plan everything had been replaced by an easier approach to events. 'We're able to just react naturally to what happens.' Relationships with the children were closer and better, although when two or more children were involved the dads felt 'split into two' trying to meet different needs at the same time. They had clarified their roles and relationships with their wider families and had developed clearer personal priorities. They were generally more assertive in balancing their work and domestic responsibilities.

All of them had started new relationships with women, though so far these had been relatively short. New relationships were clearly a very important issue. The fathers were very concerned about what the children thought about the woman, and were very clear that any woman they would consider seeing must like the children. None of the men felt guilty about the new relationships, because their spouses before they died had given them permission to start new relationships. This was obviously very important.

CONCLUSION

In reviewing the three workshops it was agreed that free discussion of feelings, and in particular new relationships, had been made easier by having an all-male group with male facilitators. The participants valued the chance to share experiences and felt contained and held.

The timing for workshops was a difficult area, and we finally agreed that six months after death was best, and three months the earliest, and that there should be three-monthly intervals between the workshops. All the men said that immediately after the bereavement, and for the first month or two, the main need was for practical advice on practical issues. They hadn't wanted people to tell them what to do, which made them feel guilty. A constant theme was 'Am I doing enough?'

In our review of the workshops three things stand out. The men who had enjoyed a good relationship with their wife were better able to cope and adapt. Permission from their wife to have new relationships was very important. It was also important to recognise that the period of waiting for the partner's death was a significant transitional phase, a time for preparation for the

new roles. We were surprised that not one of the men had spent time discussing their family's future with their partner before she died. Finally, it was clear that most of the men had depended greatly on their spouses, and needed to develop assertive skills to cope with the extra demands following their bereavement.

As a result of the workshops and other research, we have reached some tentative conclusions that need further research.

- In the traumatic transition to lone parenthood, bereaved fathers, like all parents and other fathers in transition, want and benefit from professional and self-help support in order to address the uncertainty of the new role as lone fathers.
- Their adjustment to the transition has important consequences for the future mental health of themselves and their children.
- It appears that in bereavement, as in the normal transition to parenthood and in lone parenthood by divorce, it is possible to make one of three types of adjustment: angry or hostile; passive; or negotiated. The last group, who were able to negotiate with their partners before they died and get their 'permission' to parent and become involved at the 'responsible' level, did better.
- As in the involvement of all fathers in parenting, their feelings of confidence and competence are crucial and the skills that they need can be learned to prevent lack of confidence eroding parenting skills and a downward spiral developing.
- Institutional practices and services can be changed to accompany a male 'gender ideology' that enables men to give and receive help from each other.
- Fathers' beliefs about gender roles affect their sons' grief process.
- There may be a different pattern to the male bereavement just as there is a 'his and hers' transition to parenthood.

In conclusion we see this project as a beginning, and an area that we will explore more fully. For further information about the Bereaved Fathers Project, please contact Exploring Parenthood, Latimer Education Centre, 194 Freston Road, London W10 6TT. Tel: 0181 968 1678.



Madeleine Rigby

The summer the world betrayed me

Madeleine Rigby

The summer of 1986 was a beautiful one, until that Friday night. I was ten years old, in the last year of primary school and really enjoying being free to go out with my friends to town or to the youth club. This may not seem much now, but to me it was a big step in my life, a time when my mum trusted me to go further than the school field at the end of the road.

I woke as usual to the smell of cheese on toast drifting into my room. I threw on my dress then ran downstairs, ready and waiting for my cheese slices on toast. Stuart, my 12-year-old brother, was still in bed so mum shouted up the stairs until she heard the thud of his feet on the bedroom floor.

He eventually came downstairs. By this time I had finished my toast and was glad of it because Stuart had thick Cheshire cheese on his toast, which I hated the smell of. I was a bit envious of Stuart as he was allowed to get up a bit later than me as he had only a two minute walk to school whereas I had a 20 minute walk.

Stuart was able to do what he wanted; he stayed out late, went to places on his own and with his friends. This made me quite jealous but I knew that I would soon be able to do these things.

That day I was walked to school by my dad. He was a big man and he walked extremely fast with massive strides. I used to try to keep in step with him, but never succeeded, so always found myself running every two minutes to catch up.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Madeleine looks back six years to the ten-year-old girl she was on the night her brother received his fatal injuries and describes graphically how it changed her view of the world. We publish it in line with our policy of using first-hand accounts of bereaved people to help those whose task it is to counsel the bereaved to gain greater insight into their clients' experiences.

Children who lose a sibling are often overlooked when relatives and friends of the parents come to console, and sometimes too by bereavement counsellors who may feel inadequate with young people. We hope this account will encourage them to address children's needs for counselling when visiting a bereaved family.

In the morning we had English with Mrs Hayes. Christian Greenwood, a tall, fat boy, with short brown hair and one eye of a slightly different shade than the other, had yet another argument with the teacher. He then jumped on Adam Price's desk and danced about like a hooligan until the desk snapped

At half past three the bell rang for the end of school. I ran out of school to find my mum waiting for me in the yard, chatting to the other mums. As we walked home together, holding hands, I told her about Christian, she shook her head, but couldn't hold back a smile. I was a quiet girl, who never got into fights, didn't dare argue with teachers and I would sit in the middle of the classroom, even when it was in uproar, and watch everyone, taking everything in.

Stuart was sitting in the front room doing his homework while watching television when I returned.