Working with widowed men



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Men are afraid to show emotions after a loss; they have been conditioned not to grieve and may need permission to do so and help with completing the task. However, in the presence of a woman, many men feel they can reveal their feelings without embarrassment. Sessions with a female counsellor, one-to-one or as part of men's group, need to be carefully set up but we have found that they can be beneficial and empowering.

Men may need permission to grieve and can have difficulty in accepting the reality of such a great loss as a loved one, but they often find it unacceptable to share their grief with another man. On the other hand, a man may feel more able to cry in the presence of a woman. She will accept childlike behaviour, rather like his mother did, at a time when he wishes to revert back to childhood to cope with his grief. Women are, perhaps, more aware that, 'To understand people, I must try to hear what they are not saying... what they perhaps will never be able to say'[1].

A female counsellor may understand what were the fears of the deceased and be able help the survivor to understand them too. The unanswered questions arise: did she know she was dying, and was she aware of the time limit? And particularly, why were those thoughts not shared before it was too late? The regrets experienced by widowers vary greatly. The loss of all the future plans is enormous: 'We were going to update our wills, re-plan the garden and decorate the house'; 'I wish I had told my wife I couldn't cope alone. She would have planned with me - she was a good forward planner. I wanted to go first'; 'I regret not listening to her when she complained about her pain. We won't grow old together and she will miss the grandchildren growing up'.

One client wanted a woman's thoughts about the inconveniences of his wife's illness. He needed to express his hatred of her new body image after she had been mutilated by mastectomy. She had felt rejected by everyone and had turned away. He could not comfort her and feared causing her more physical pain by touching her. Through counselling he was able to express anger against God and, especially, the medical profession. Often the bedroom seemed the most appropriate place to cry, when the door was closed against the family and the world. Men do also need to talk about their lack of sexual satisfaction, their feeling of deprivation in that area, without being regarded as abnormal. One said he needed sex as lust, not love, and that he had desires to grab the next woman off the street or use a prostitute for his relief.

THE COUNSELLING RELATIONSHIP

Arranging the sessions

When setting up appointments for men to be seen by female counsellors, it is the best policy to offer the first session in an office setting. Though the client may not feel so secure, an office meeting is safer for the counsellor and brings home to the client the nature of the relationship between client and counsellor, reducing the likelihood of contacts being misconstrued. It also enables the counsellor to assess whether or not she would feel secure if she should subsequently visit this client at home. Only if she is certain that this is safe should she offer to visit. To keep within the boundaries of the counselling relationship a series of appointments is made in advance, and to avoid misunderstandings a handshake at the beginning and end of each session is standard practice.

Appointments with a father are usually arranged for a time when children are at school. Men have been conditioned never to show feelings and to believe that displaying them will upset the family structure and unity, so fathers tend to feel that their offspring should be unaware of their emotional turmoil. A man fears losing his family's respect, and of failing those close to him when they need to rely on his strength. This can produce additional feelings of anger and fear, resentment and bitterness that he is unable to comfort them adequately in their grief. 'At a time when children need all the support of the positive family experience... ironically it is the time when parents have least to offer as they struggle to survive their grief'[2]. A father can share his sadness if he is given a 'safe place' with a counsellor who will be in his life for only a short time.

Special problems

At certain stages in the grieving process some men become dependent on the visits of their counsellor and will suggest having lunch together or make moves to become personally involved. Counsellors should politely decline to accept such offers, which would seriously compromise their relationship with their client. To quote: 'My counsellor became very precious to me. In fact our sessions together became the highlight of my week'.

The counsellor and her client need to keep in mind that dealing with feelings after a bereavement is hard work and it is necessary to have a business-like approach, with aims and objectives. Most clients work through and are finally able to express their appreciation. For example:

> 'The feelings that I experienced at first were unbelievable, ranging from anger to acute loneliness and despair. I was helped through each stage, one by one, until I came to terms with my loss, and was then offered suggestions on rebuilding my life. Without this care and help I honestly don't know how I would have coped, especially with the little ones.'

EDITOR'S NOTE

In a recent study Schut[1] showed that men benefit more than women from a type of conselling that helps them to express feelings. In this article, Christine Crossland show how female counsellors can help bereaved men to do this.

1. Schut H *et al.* Intervention for the bereaved: gender differences in the efficacy of two counselling programmes. *British Journal of Clinical Psychology* 1997; 36 (1): 63-72.

This testimonial demonstrates the efficacy of working through Worden's four 'Tasks of Mourning'[3]: to accept the reality of the loss; to work through to the pain of grief; to adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing; and to emotionally relocate the deceased and move on with life. It was interesting to hear that following counselling some men said they felt more confident to fight their own battles.

RESPONSES TO GRIEF

In analysing the responses to grief from men of different age groups it is apparent that they react differently according to their circumstances, and that their practical problems vary considerably.

Younger men

Bereaved of a wife, young men lose their child carer, their housekeeper and their lover and find themselves left with all the household duties. One said he needed to employ someone but found his financial situation desperate. He had lost his wife's income and resented a different woman in his house. He was angered that a stranger was entering his (their) bedroom, his sacred place where he could mourn and weep, and cuddle her nightdress to remind him of their closeness physically, mentally and sexually. On other days he experienced resentment towards the children whose presence deprived him of any social life unless he could find a satisfactory child minder. Emotional and sexual deprivation is a problem for many bereaved men.

Being left in charge of young children is a great responsibility and finding the way to help these men with their grieving journey can be most difficult. However, the counsellor working with the father in depth can allow him to explore pathways that will be beneficial for the young ones. Finding the resources to pay for replacement help can be a serious problem and some have had to rely on outside family members. At present a widower's State pension scheme does not exist in the UK, although some employers have their own schemes covering these circumstances. So, for the majority, any extra money required has to come from earnings.

Middle-aged men

In this age group there are frequently teenagers still at home and dealing with their variable emotional outbursts can be onerous. Having to talk to a daughter about puberty, boyfriends and new roles which she must undertake can be daunting. Resentment at this stage may cause further stress within the family. It was beneficial to discuss with an unknown female counsellor those aspects which had become embarrassing. Many men remarry within the first year to gain a replacement. One removed all the photographs of his first wife, hoping that by doing so his visiting family would refrain from referring to her.

Older men

This group have enjoyed marriages of up to 50 years duration. Many do not know how to cook or manage a household. They feel extremely isolated and, if they are infirm, need nursing care. Responses varied between finding a replacement quickly or going into a home. Doubts may exist concerning future care within the family, and many wish to die and join the deceased. Suicide rates are highest for men in this age group. Some will discuss suicide with their counsellor only to discover each method to be too horrific to contemplate. Exploring these fantasies can be the beginning of the grieving journey.

In my experience short-term goals for the elderly should be encouraged. For instance an older man can indulge both himself and his grandchildren with an outing or other treat. Definite invitations from friends and social groups are very helpful and should be readily accepted. If a residential placement is sought, all his domestic requirements will be fulfilled, leaving him free for hobbies and new interests safe in the knowledge that he will be cared for if his health deteriorates.

A MEN'S GROUP

Men who had received counselling were invited to join a men's group that would bring together a mixture of ages and personalities. This transitional group for men was not intended as a social or friendship group but one of participation with a forward-looking agenda. The meetings were planned for one evening each month. Initially it was intended to provide for a mixed group but women who had been receiving counselling were unprepared to venture out alone at night. They had lost their 'protector' and felt vulnerable by themselves.

Within the group, seated round a large table, each man was asked to 'check in' and introduce himself. They were invited to share their experiences, which brought a new dimension to their situation. The facilitator and her helper offered their own self-disclosure and became an integral part of the group. It became possible for everyone to share feelings and insecurities, to explore and practice within the safety of the group the new roles they were having to establish as a result of bereavement and, eventually, to feel more confident about assuming these in society.

All the participants appeared at ease and in time the freedom and pleasure of the meetings became most beneficial. They considered that a male co-coordinator would have inhibited some of that freedom since the men would have felt they had to be strong and control their vulnerability in front of a male facilitator. It seems that the role of female counsellors in this area is a valuable one.

POINTS TO CONSIDER

- Participants need to value the fact that they are not alone and that there are many others in like circumstances who need a little encouragement.
- Each person should be free to speak and be listened to in order to feel a sense of ownership of the group.
- Members should have the freedom to laugh without feeling disloyal.
- Members should feel more empowered and challenged in their lives and be encouraged towards positive and independent action.

'We cannot prevent the birds of sorrow landing on our shoulder. We can prevent them nesting in our hair'[4]. **BC**

References

1. Powell J. Why Am I Afraid To Tell You Who I Am? Illinois, USA: Argus Communications, 1969; London, UK: HarperCollins, 1975, p113.
2. La Tour K. In: Ward B. Good Grief: Under Elevens, 2nd edn. London, UK: Jessica Kingsley, 1996, p37.
3. Worden W. Grief Counselling and Grief Therapy. London, UK: Tavistock Routledge, 1991.
4. Anon. Old Chinese proverb.

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