



# Duke University Health System

## Bereavement

### A Father's Grief

One cannot lose someone they love without feeling sad, angry, anxious, or even depressed. When a child dies everyone involved grieves – fathers as well as mothers. One does NOT have a choice in the matter. The choice however, is HOW one chooses to grieve and what one does with their grief.

Dads often set their own grief aside in order to “take care” of his wife/partner. Therefore, dads are often neglected grievers and when they are flooded with emotions and concerns, it is very difficult for them. Some men may also feel intimidated by the medical institution and/or its staff adding to the feelings of confusion and helplessness.

#### **What feelings might I experience?**

- ◆ One of the more difficult feelings may be that of **anger**. It may be:
  - Unspoken, but is felt by those around you.
  - Misdirected at your wife/partner, medical people, nurses, clergy, God, or even at yourself.
  - In the form of blame - blaming others e.g. medical personal, family, friends, or even yourself for what has happened.
- ◆ It is OK to feel anger when your child has died. It is unfair and an unjust event.

#### **Some men may:**

- ◆ Feel helpless because there is nothing they can do to “fix” it or take away the pain.
- ◆ Be surprised by their own tears - crying spells may happen in the car, when alone, or at other odd times. Do not be alarmed – this is a natural response. Crying does not invalidate manliness, but indicates that you care.
  - Trust yourself and use this behavior as a signal of what you need – i.e. whether it is to think, meditate, relax, or even talk to someone who understands.
- ◆ Feel left out of the situation:
  - Because of society’s influence to be “strong” and not to show their feelings. Needed emotional support is often not provided because men are seen as being “in control” and not in need of support – even when they do.
  - People may ask about how your wife/partner is doing – assuming that you are fine or are not willing to talk about the loss.

#### **It is important to understand**

- ◆ The importance of the event – the child’s death is a mutual loss - it is something that happened to both of you. The death of a child is the worst thing that your wife/partner has experienced and maybe you too.



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- ◆ That both you and your wife/partner will grieve – however, the grieving styles will probably be different. **There is no one right or wrong way to grieve.**
- ◆ That your wife/partner NEEDS you to be there for her – in so doing you may also be helping yourself. In taking this journey together neither of you will feel all alone.
- ◆ Allow your wife/partner to have the feelings she is experiencing – be with her while she cries, sobs, or even screams, as she needs to. It may be comforting to her for you to share your feelings with her.
- ◆ Touching and holding each other may be comforting. Holding does not take away the pain but it is a way of being together. Spending “alone time” together as a couple often helps to cope with the outside pressures and demands.
- ◆ Listening to each other is very importance. Encourage each other to share her feelings and let her to talk about the child, as she needs to – doing this may also help you.
- ◆ Realize that this journey may take much longer than you think. The grief that comes with the death of a child can last a very long time. Be ready for it and allow yourselves the needed time
- ◆ Include your wife/partner in the decision making process. This will lessen your responsibilities as well as preventing potential future problems. Leaving her out of the process is not protecting her and may even prolong her grief.

#### **Helpful Tips**

- ◆ Lighten your load temporarily – until after you are more able to cope more effectively
- ◆ Take some time to think things through
- ◆ Consider sharing your concerns and thoughts with other fathers who have also lost their children.
- ◆ Let your family know when you need time for yourself
- ◆ Engage in physical exercise – to release the emotional energy
- ◆ If you experience anger – get angry at things NOT people
- ◆ Seek professional help – if and when you think you need it
- ◆ Appreciate and respect your feelings – Do not delay or run away from them.

***A precious gift for you and your wife/partner***

***Is to talk about your loss openly and honestly,  
and take care of each other and yourselves.***