

Men and bereavement

IN THIS ISSUE, REGISTERED COUNSELLOR AND PSYCHOTHERAPIST

SHARON HINSULL FOCUSES ON GRIEF.

SHARON HINSULL



Grieving a loss can often lead us down a challenging and unpredictable path. One minute we might feel as though we are coping reasonably well with the grieving process; the next, we could find ourselves confronted by an avalanche of intense and overwhelming emotion. Everyone has their unique way

of grieving, and there is no set pattern to how people are expected to experience or process their grief. Coming to terms with the death of a loved one can be one of the hardest challenges that any of us has to face in life, and the process through which we go about doing so can vary enormously from person to person.

GENDER AND GRIEVING

Just because someone might not outwardly display their feelings of grief in visible expressions of mourning doesn't mean to say that they are not experiencing the effects of the grieving process. Emotions can sometimes remain very deeply buried or are perhaps re-channelled into more action-focused forms of grieving. Bereavement support charity Cruse recognises that there can often be a noticeably different grief reaction generated amongst men to that of women.

"We can all be deeply affected by grief, but we have found that men may experience it differently than women. At Cruse, we offer help to everyone, whatever their experience of grief or however long it has been since the person died. But we find that men are much less likely to seek our help.

"This can be partly due to not realising what they are feeling is related to their bereavement. This is also true for women but more so for men. That persistent headache, increased irritability or inability to concentrate at work can all be due to grief."

"EMOTIONS CAN SOMETIMES REMAIN VERY DEEPLY BURIED"

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FEELING HELPLESS AND ALONE

Recent research by the Sue Ryder charity revealed that 80 per cent of men feel alone in their grief, suggesting a widespread reluctance by men to reach out for support following a bereavement. Whilst social attitudes towards men’s emotional well-being might be steadily improving, there is still a long way to go in educating men on the profound and long-lasting impact that the experience of grief can have on their lives.

Senior bereavement counsellor Val O’Garro has helped to support many men through the grieving process during her years working in both voluntary and private practice. She observes that a lack of preparedness for loss seems to catch men out more than anything else, often

leaving them feeling quite helpless in the wake of a significant bereavement.

“Men and grief are really not compatible. When tragedy strikes, men cling to what they know and find it virtually impossible to conceive of a world without their loved ones. All of the things they aren’t prepared for impact on their ability to grieve, and things can get messy and difficult to separate.”

No one can ever hope to fully prepare for the death of a loved one, especially when the nature of the loss is sudden or unexpected. Sometimes the shock of someone dying without warning or the trauma of losing a loved one in tragic circumstances can be enough to derail the grieving process before it has even had a chance to get started.

“MEN GOING THROUGH THE GRIEVING PROCESS OFTEN TEND TO WITHDRAW INTO THEMSELVES”

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NAVIGATING LOSS

So, what is meant by grief, and what does a man’s grieving style typically look like? A dictionary definition of the term describes it as a ‘feeling of intense sorrow’ or ‘feeling very sad because someone has died’. But the grieving process is much more complicated than that, often incorporating a broader range of potential feelings and reactions than could ever be imagined.

According to Cruse, men going through the grieving process often tend to withdraw into themselves, sometimes resorting to coping strategies that are ultimately unhelpful in dealing with their loss, such as:

- being less likely to talk to others about how they are feeling
- being less likely to express emotions, with anger being a possible exception
- feeling a pressure to be strong and silent, and to be in charge and solve problems
- throwing themselves into ‘distracting behaviours’ – work, practical tasks, or even a new relationship
- turning to alcohol, drugs or risk-taking to help them cope or mask their feelings
- finding that their grief shows up in physical symptoms
- also being more likely to be at risk of dying themselves, including being more at risk of suicide

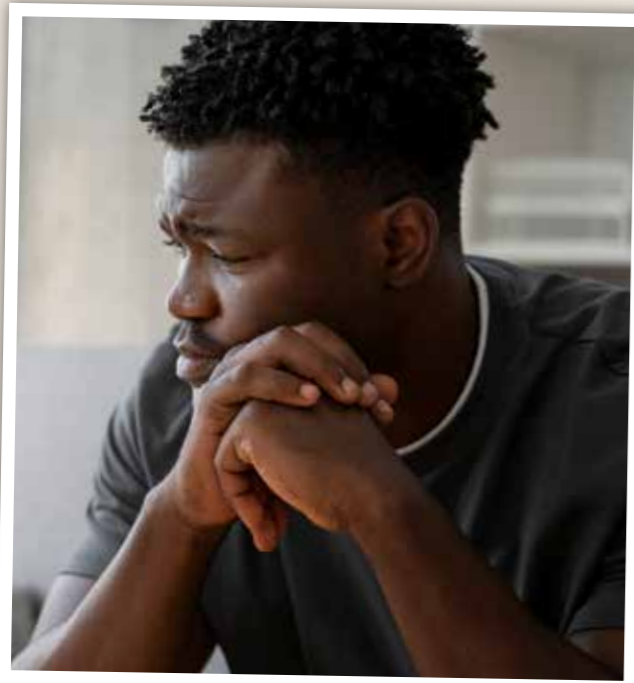
MUTUAL SUPPORT

In its recently published research findings, the Sue Ryder charity concluded that what would appear to benefit men the most whilst working through their grief is:

- spending time with family and friends
- being able to cry and feel their emotions
- being able to talk about how they are feeling
- feeling as if they are doing something productive with their time

One organisation that recognises the importance of men being able to share their feelings in a safe and mutually supportive environment is Strongmen. This peer-run self-help charity provides emotional support for men who have been bereaved. Combining a dedicated Man2Man listening service with regular weekend retreats, Strongmen was founded by Efrem Brynin and Dan Cross, two former contestants on Channel 4’s SAS: Who Dares Wins.





Having both endured devastating losses in their personal lives, the two men found physical fitness to be one of the most effective means of coping with their grief. As they started sharing their experiences, Dan and Efrem soon discovered they had much in common.

“We quickly realised that we both used physical exercise and well-being to help us recover from the traumatic loss of our loved ones”, recalls Efrem. “There were no bereavement support services that appealed to both of us, and we noticed many were aimed at and staffed by females”.

Motivated by a shared struggle to find support during the grieving process, Dan and Efrem set out to establish a service that was more broadly aimed at meeting the needs of men who have been bereaved, taking into consideration the role of physical and mental well-being on the road to emotional recovery.

“StrongMen is unique as there is no similar bereavement support service available for men. All our services are staffed and run by people with

experience of loss, so the empathy provided is genuine and authentic, which is priceless. Our Weekender service provides a safe environment for men to talk openly, honestly, and without judgement about their challenges. We also make sure that NOBODY ever feels like they must share if they don't want to. The impact of our service is life-changing and, in some cases, lifesaving.”

This apparent ripple effect is both far-reaching and long-lasting, which Efrem acknowledges is a significant factor in considering the longer-term impact of loss. “Bereavement is a journey that will likely last the rest of your life. Accepting that is part of that journey. You must accept that there is no cure and when tough times come (and they will), make sure you try and break things down to the basics; live only in that moment and don't reflect and worry about what you cannot change. I like to stick to what I know works for me: keeping fit and active, taking care of what I eat and ensuring I stay hydrated. This makes me stronger emotionally and physically.”

STRENGTH IN SHARING

The Strongmen philosophy may be a straightforward one in essence. But as Efrem points out, it reflects the importance for men to feel able to open up to others throughout the grieving process and beyond. “The most important advice I would give is to be honest, talk to those around you, tell them when you are struggling and need help, and let them know when you are in a good place. The beauty of sharing is just that - sharing.”



ORGANISATIONS OF SUPPORT

At a Loss

Signposting website for bereavement services and counselling.

Bereaved through Alcohol and Drugs

Information and support for anyone bereaved through drug or alcohol use.

Child Bereavement UK

Support when a baby or child of any age is dying or a child is facing bereavement.

Cruse Bereavement Care

The leading national charity for bereaved people, offering grief support, advice and information.

Sands

Information and support for anyone affected by the death of a baby.

Strongmen

Peer-led support for men who have been bereaved, offered on a group or one-to-one basis.

Sudden

Support for people bereaved by sudden death.

Sue Ryder

Support for people during the most difficult times, including terminal illness and bereavement.

Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide

Emotional and practical support for anyone bereaved or affected by suicide.

The Compassionate Friends

Provides support to bereaved families after the death of a child.

The Good Grief Trust

Charity, run by the bereaved, providing reassurance, advice and support.

Widowed and Young

Offers a peer-to-peer support network to anyone aged 50 or under when their partner died. ❖

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