

Male Grief Examined

Child Loss Numbers

Losing a child is likely the most devastating experience of your life. The loss, typically sudden, left you heartbroken, angry, confused, numb, rejected. You may have suffered mentally and physically, and your marriage may have become stressed. The grief was real, but you didn't know how to express it; you felt isolated. You're not alone! Millions of men are grieving from child loss, whether it is from miscarriage, stillbirth, or the death of an infant, young child, teen, or adult child. Here are some numbers:

- Miscarriage, loss before 20 weeks gestation, occurs in about 1 in 4 pregnancies worldwide.¹
- Stillbirth, loss after 20–24 weeks gestation, occurs in nearly 3 million pregnancies annually around the world. More than 1 million of those stillbirths (33 percent) occur during labor.²
- Among the 133 million babies born alive worldwide each year, 2.8 million die in the first week of life.³
- In the United States, in 2019, approximately 10,000 children died between the ages of 1 and 14, and another 10,000 died between the ages of 15 and 19.
- In the United States, roughly 3,000 adults between the ages of 25 and 34 die annually.

The number of men all over the world facing the grief of child loss on any given day is seemingly incalculable. As men, how do we deal with this grief? How does it affect us mentally and physically? How does it affect our marriages? How do we view our masculinity in response to our loss? How do we heal?

Grief Defined

First, what is grief? Most dictionaries define it along these lines: “deep sadness caused especially by someone’s death” or “keen mental suffering or distress over affliction or loss.” Grief and loss, especially human death, go hand in hand. In response to extreme loss, humans experience various, distinctive stages of grief. The stages noted below are often not sequential, nor do they have clear beginning and end points. But each stage does represent a general characteristic that most people experience when grieving. Understanding these general characteristics can help you understand your own experience of grief.

- *Denial*—the action of declaring something to be untrue. As you first learn of the loss, you may feel shocked or numb and question whether the news is true. Although your rational mind can see that the loss has in fact occurred, often your actions or behaviors take some time to catch up to that reality.
- *Anger*—a strong feeling of displeasure or hostility. As you understand the news to be true, you may experience anger, which you may direct at yourself, others, or God.
- *Bargaining*—an effort to negotiate the terms and conditions of a transaction. You may begin thinking about what you could have done to prevent your loss and consider making deals with God. Bargaining often comes into play with the news that a loved one is going to die but has not yet passed.
- *Depression*—feelings of severe sadness. As your loss concretely begins to affect your daily life, sadness may arise in varying degrees. You may experience crying, sleeplessness, or eating changes.

- *Acceptance*—the action of consenting to receive something offered. At some point you accept the reality of your loss, and although it still hurts, you're able to move forward in life.

After the loss of a child, a father is likely to cycle through these stages of grief in unpredictable patterns that are unique to his own journey of grief, but every man experiences a type of these characteristics in his own way and in his own time. The following is a review of the scientific literature regarding how men grieve and the effects of that grief.

Male Grief

Men grieve differently than women.⁴ To us men, this is no surprise! But this difference is a major theme that appears over and over in the research literature. Many times men and women have been compared in research studies examining grief after child loss, with the resulting observation that the two sexes grieve in different ways, at different times, and with different severity.

Here are a few common differences:

- Men generally grieve less intensely and less enduringly.⁵
- Men typically cry less, talk less about the event, and generally do not find seeing a pregnant woman as painful as women do.⁶
- Men typically report less severe anxiety and depression immediately following the loss of a child.⁷
- Most men believe their primary role is to support their wives during times of grieving.⁸
- Most men feel more marginalized and less acknowledged than women following loss.⁹

Though male grief *appears* to be less intense than female grief, this is not always true and is very dependent on the unique loss of every man. For example, in a research study examining men's response to miscarriage, men reported higher levels of grief than women on a general grief scale—a result not anticipated by the researchers.¹⁰ The result

likely was surprising because social expectations encourage men to be stoic and unwavering. And this social expectation does reflect how men generally are less likely, compared with women, to accept support and outwardly display emotional reactions.¹¹ Of the men who grieve externally, many grieve alone with feelings of sadness, devastation, powerlessness, fear, and shock.¹²

Many studies focus on grief shortly after a loss, but men tend to grieve more after the wife has recovered from her initial grief.¹³ In fact, from the time of loss until present, men are preoccupied by their loss in every aspect of their daily lives.¹⁴ Men feel the loss of a child differently perhaps, but no less than women do.¹⁵

Not only do men grieve differently than women, but they also grieve differently from each other. Because men express different forms of grief, flexibility of support is necessary following a loss.¹⁶ Grief is different for all of us because each of us has a different history. Our age, past trauma, previous child losses, length of marriage, issues with infertility, religious beliefs, living children, and many other factors can all impact how we grieve and how devastated or isolated we feel following a loss.¹⁷

Regardless of the circumstances, child loss is a significant life event for all.¹⁸ The loss of a child changes the way we deal with grief and how we view the world. It also significantly affects how we respond to subsequent pregnancies, particularly with loss from miscarriage or stillbirth. Previous losses and struggles with infertility make the emotional toll even greater.¹⁹ In subsequent pregnancies, negative psychological symptoms, especially anxiety, are profound, and yet most fathers want to be more involved in the obstetric care than they had previously been.²⁰

After the loss of a child, men typically feel powerless. Particularly following miscarriage and stillbirth, the possibility of future pregnancies produces anxiety, and subsequent pregnancies produce constant fear of loss. Soon after the loss, there is internal and external pressure to delay or prioritize conception.²¹ Following another conception, men understandably withhold telling anyone too early about a new

pregnancy for fear of loss.²² However, grief declines during subsequent pregnancies with routine confirmatory ultrasounds.²³

Stillbirth presents the life-and-death paradox: the act of giving life through birth, and the death of the child during or before that birth.²⁴ Themes of grief common to men experiencing stillbirth include the centrality of hope, the importance of the personhood of the baby, protective care of the child, and the impact of the loss on personal relationships.²⁵ In stillbirth, many fathers regret not holding or spending time with their baby.²⁶ Stillbirth also leads men to avoid activities associated with the loss or other babies.²⁷

Though most research on child loss is centered on miscarriage, stillbirth, and infant loss, in the few studies focused on adult child loss, the same realization resounds—men grieve. A major source of grief for all men is having to give up their hopes for and expectations of the child.²⁸ Maybe this theme helps explain the differences between male and female grief; men have something inherent in their fatherhood that only they can provide to their children.

The Physiological Effects of Grief

Losing a child affects us physically in a number of ways. By far in the research literature, post-traumatic stress disorder is the most observed effect and is pervasive across all types of men and child loss.²⁹ The trauma of child loss can lead men to engage in avoidance and coping behaviors, like alcohol consumption or drug use,³⁰ and the trauma can significantly impact eating, sleeping, self-care, and family-care patterns.³¹ Research around child loss and post-traumatic stress disorder indicates that parents who lose a child have higher morbidity and mortality outcomes than adults who lose a spouse or parent.³²

Post-traumatic stress can affect metabolism and lead to obesity, and it is well known for causing cardiovascular problems and sleep irregularity. Symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder include numbness, memory decline, nightmares, insomnia, guilt, hopelessness, lack of focus, hallucinations, anger, self-destruction, shame, and flashbacks. A common symptom is anxiety, which can appear abruptly for short

periods (panic attacks) or be present all the time (general anxiety). Anxiety may appear only during events connected to the child loss or may have no apparent connection to the loss. The physiological effects on the body that follow child loss are real and point to the need for physical and mental health support. (See part IV for mood-screening questionnaires and other resources.)

Male Grief and Marriage

How you grieve will affect your marriage. When Catholic men think about marriage, they think about children; the two naturally are united in each other. Prior to marriage, most men rarely think about child loss, and even if they do, they don't think it will happen to them. No father can prepare for such unexpected suffering and grief. After entering into this world of child loss, we authors realized that many men are grieving over their lost children, whether in the womb, at birth, or after birth. Meeting other men who are carrying the same cross of child loss helped us to better cope with our grief. Although we all experience grief somewhat differently, we gathered that most of us felt as if we were grieving silently.

Until recently, most research on child loss grief was focused on women, with a few studies examining couples. Recent research has more closely examined male grief, with two themes dominating: men believe their primary role is to support their wives, and men feel overlooked in the support process. We know that fathers are hurting and are, in fact, assuming a double burden in response to a loss. They experience their own pain of loss *and* the physical and emotional suffering of their wives.

Most married men want to be fathers. Men also want their wives to become mothers. Following loss, many men prioritize the grief of their wives,³³ and this often means that men delay grieving, even up to four months after loss.³⁴ Men feel obligated to disregard their own suffering to support the mental health of their wives.³⁵ In an effort not to burden their wives, to give them space, men also encounter loneliness; they

don't know how best to grieve, or they struggle finding comfortable support outlets.³⁶

Another prominent aspect of male grief is the feeling that their grief is only minimally acknowledged.³⁷ A lack of acknowledgment from family, friends, and health-care professionals means that wives eventually become the only support of grieving men, which can improve or harm the marital relationship. Some men reported the focused communication helped their marriage, while others reported more conflict and relationship strain.³⁸

The fact that there are different grieving styles between spouses increases men's sense of isolation, adds to their grief, and leads to marital difficulties.³⁹ Plus, many times feelings of guilt become overwhelming.⁴⁰ Assuming you could have prevented the loss can fuel guilt, or thinking your wife could have done something can fuel spousal resentment. However, despite early conflict, learning to understand each other's grief can ultimately strengthen the relationship.⁴¹

Some couples report growing closer through dealing with child loss.⁴² When parents are well supported, the grieving process can provide resilience, a more compassionate outlook on life, and a strengthened marriage.⁴³ Engaging in activities together, such as participating in a ritual for the lost child, can reduce the grief experienced by couples.⁴⁴

Obvious from research and life experience is that we men tend to grieve differently than women, and women grieve differently than us, so we must be open to their experiences. And, importantly, "Fathers need support in their own right, rather than simply as an adjunct to their [wife]."⁴⁵

Self-Concept in Grief

For many men, child loss cuts to the heart of fatherhood—having, protecting, and providing for his children. Questions arise, such as, What is it to be a man? What is fatherhood? Who am I, and what is my role now? With loss, some men feel as though they failed in their role as provider and protector. This perception, which often goes

unrecognized, can have a negative impact on their self-esteem and identity.⁴⁶

The stronger we desire paternal identity, the longer our grief symptoms last. And the longer we experience that paternal identity, the more intensely our grief systems persist. Our paternal identity quickens with the first heartbeat heard during the ultrasound, and this connection grows while we talk to our child in the womb, brush a young daughter's hair, or teach a son to drive.

With the questioned identity that accompanies loss, other questions arise. In particular, the question of "what if" consumes many fathers.⁴⁷ It's common to wonder what we would be doing if our child was here with us now. We may struggle when questions surrounding our identity arise in conversations with others. For example, do you include your lost child in the count of children when someone asks how many kids you have? Do you prefer not to?⁴⁸ As fathers, many of us want to speak naturally about our children, but to do so creates discomfort in us and others.

In addition to being fathers, we are husbands. Following loss, our self-concept moves to prioritizing our wife's grief—being more attuned to her sorrow, more compassionate, and more focused on strengthening the relationship as together we have experienced this tragedy. Grieving can lead to a new perspective on life and our own identity.

Healing

Support—we all need it, even when we think we may not. When we do want it, where do we find it? As mentioned earlier, a dominant theme for men is feeling that their grief is not acknowledged. Research shows that most men feel excluded from health-care services and follow-up support after their loss.⁴⁹ As a result, many men don't know that support groups exist for couples or exclusively for men experiencing child loss. Following miscarriage and stillbirth, men feel marginalized, particularly when people make comments implying that the child is "replaceable," as when they flippantly suggest having another or

comment that it's better the loss occurred before birth.⁵⁰ Plus, many men feel that clinicians are not sensitive to the loss of a human being.⁵¹

Men who grieve externally tend to grieve alone or by developing distractions, like hobbies, which are often solitary activities.⁵² Is this isolated grieving inherent to the way men naturally grieve, or does it stem from the fact that men are given less attention following loss? This question may be difficult to answer, but many men find it harder than most women to seek or accept help for mental health concerns, grief, and adjustment to loss.⁵³

Upon deciding to seek or accept help, most of the time men rely on informal support from friends and family instead of professionals. This approach may be of limited help depending on their response. Finding friends who have experienced similar loss can be most supportive.⁵⁴ Some men have trouble talking to anyone about the loss, which partly may be due to a lack of community recognition and understanding. In these instances, promptings by another bereaved parent can open up a discussion of loss.⁵⁵ Of course, healing can come in many ways. Some men find healing by creating memorials of their children, while others focus on the future and ways to grow their family by various means, such as adoption.⁵⁶

In general, men feel as though support resources are lacking,⁵⁷ which is why we decided to write this book—to provide a grieving guide for grieving men. In addition to the resources included in part IV, we hope that the stories and reflections included here help you find comfort, acceptance, encouragement, and peace, and that you come to know that you're not alone.