

## A FATHER'S GRIEF

“When asked, as fathers frequently are, about how his wife is doing, he is amazed that no one realizes he is barely holding himself together.”

How does a father grieve? Is the process different from that of a mother? I believe we fathers feel the same emotions, but it is how we experience these emotions and how we deal with them that can differ greatly from a mother's grief experience. Men may be articulate, even garrulous, but women are expressive. Many men prefer talking about ideals; women feel comfortable discussing feelings. Yet grief is about emotions and feelings and how to work through them; it is not about ideas... Men are conditioned not to show feelings but to stifle them. We build a shell, layer after layer as a defense against the bumps and bruises of boyhood, the hurt limbs, and the hurt feelings. For many of us, this is the perspective from which we must confront our grief.

What do men do with pain they cannot shrug off?... Men of my generation may try to ignore the pain, but the death of a child results in a level of pain that is impossible to ignore. So we acknowledge it, and then we try to carry on. Even in the business world, men are not granted leave to recover from a loss. We're expected to observe the rituals of mourning and then throw ourselves back into our work, put up a good front, and continue to function at a high level of concentration and dedication. I carried this expectation to a ridiculous level. When I learned my son died, I flew out to the city where my son was attending college and made the necessary arrangements. Then I called my boss to let him know that we would be staying over one night and I would be back to work the next day!

Grief is a label attached to such a myriad of emotions that it is impossible to identify all of them adequately, or describe their intensity. For me, anger was probably the most intense emotion I experienced. As a parent, I expected to protect my family; and as a man, I expected always to be in control. The sense of helplessness I experienced and the lack of control over events overwhelmed me.

Anger was not the only intense emotion I experienced. Guilt consumed me. Why wasn't I a better father when Bryan (my son) was alive? Why didn't I spend more time with him? How could I have allowed my career to infringe on time with my children? I always seemed to be looking forward towards the future, rather than experiencing the present. Perhaps this issue is particularly significant for fathers who invest so much of their time and energy focused on the future, preparing a child's way, too often deferring activities with the family.

In the five years since Bryan's death, grief has been like learning to climb a mountain. The slope is steep and often slippery, and the air is thinner the higher I venture. But as I work my way up, my muscles grow stronger. ...My perspective has changed. What drove me before, what seemed so God-awful important to me, has shifted in focus to my family, my work with The Compassionate Friends, and my work with children. How did I know when I was finally beginning to heal? It was simply this; when I first thought of the joy of Bryan's life, rather than the pain of his death. Maybe in a year or so I'll know what the other side of the mountain is like.

Reprinted in part from an article by Bob Rosenberg, National Compassionate Friends Newsletter, Summer 1992.