



Men and Mourning: A Man's Journey Through Grief *(En Español)*

[Grief and Mourning](#) | [Withdrawing from Reality](#) | [Working Through the Grief](#) | [Unique Components of Male Grief](#) | [The Death of a Child](#) | [The Death of a Parent](#) | [The Death of a Wife or Partner](#) | [Order this Pamphlet](#)

Regina Sobieski, MSIS, CTCb With gratitude to

David Spaulding

Craig Schrock

Bob Shearouse, JD

Dave Leisure, MSSW

Dr. Robert Weiss

Dr. Newton Hightower

Daniel Ryder, MSW

Ken Shelton

Mike Nichols

and Carol Staudacher

for their contributions.

Bob's Grief Experience

Late one night, Bob was awakened by a phone call. A hospital emergency nurse told him that his son had been seriously injured in a vehicular crash. She said that he and his wife should come to the hospital at once. Bob was scared, and also felt angry with the person who caused the wreck - - even if it turned out to be his son. His frustration continued to build during the frenzied drive to the hospital. As they waited for the doctor, Bob felt every emotion he could ever remember experiencing. Eventually the doctor came to tell Bob and his wife that the surgical team had tried but failed to save their child.

Bob's waves of emotional reactions were interspersed with periods of numbness, so he was temporarily able to maintain his composure in the presence of the grieving family.

After a few moments though, everything within Bob seemed swallowed up by grief. He felt out of control, so he began to take care of immediate needs. He called relatives and the funeral home. He nurtured other family members intermittently.

During the next few days he orchestrated the funeral, feeling that he was protecting his wife and other children from participation in the planning. After the funeral, Bob no longer had so many tasks to complete. He felt lost, trying to make sense of the crime, while desperately attempting to restore some normalcy in his life and within his family. Appearing "strong" to his fellow workers as

he went about his daily work, he constantly fought his need to mourn. During a few moments of solitude, he pondered over his last conversation with his son. He tried to remember the last words of nondescript talk. He swallowed hard to keep the tears from flowing. In fact, he swallowed a lot. And he sighed a lot.

When activity slowed down, Bob felt empty. At work, his mind raced with grief, guilt, anger and sadness. He was afraid to talk about what happened, knowing he might break down. Raised with the belief that "men don't cry," he shoved his emotions deep down inside. He withdrew from his colleagues. He did not want to be labeled "incompetent" or "unstable."

The more Bob withdrew, the harder he had to work to keep his mind occupied. He buried himself in work. His colleagues, not knowing how to approach him, seemed to avoid him whenever they could. They didn't know what to say, and even if they did, they didn't want to remind Bob of the tragedy. Perhaps they were thinking about the fact that their child or wife could also be killed by a drunk driver, and that was too frightening to ponder on, let alone talk about. So they ignored Bob, convincing themselves that he could find his own solace and peace.

Perhaps your experience has been similar to Bob's. Some of his story may not apply to you, but you may identify with his awkwardness in deciding how to handle the turmoil now in your life.

Grief and Mourning

You are experiencing grief, one of the most profound and prolonged emotional reactions experienced by human beings. When someone loved doesn't die naturally, but is killed by the senseless behavior of a drunk driver, grief can be so strong, so intense that it goes beyond what can be described in words. It is important to get to the core of your grief and try to make some sense of it. Only by allowing yourself to emotionally experience the pain of your loved one's death is it possible to eventually confront the loss and begin to heal. Grief is more than a matter of the mind. It is a matter of the heart. Mourning can mean crying real tears, perhaps sobbing from deep in your gut. You will need to discover for yourself how best to mourn.

Before focusing on the unique grief experiences of men, it is important to understand grief in general.

Many labels have been attached to the various components of grieving and mourning over the years. Typical ones include: retreating, withdrawing, denying, working through, resolving, facing, confronting, accommodating and adjusting.

These components are fluid and overlapping and must not be thought of as distinct stages like innings in a baseball game. Don't try to label yourself or prescribe how you will feel tomorrow or next year. You may even skip some of the components. That's okay.

Withdrawing from Reality

Immediately after a death, especially if the death was sudden and violent, many people withdraw psychologically. Retreating is a healthy coping mechanism to manage pain and anxiety. Typical retreat strategies include shock, disbelief, numbness, confusion, disorientation, and denial. Withdrawing can be intentional, such as attending to funeral arrangements and the legal case rather than slowing down to feel the pain. Keeping busy can temporarily stifle the full emotional response, but it is a thin defense.

Your feeling and thought processes can also automatically and unconsciously shut down until you are better able to face what has happened. This sense of numbness protects you from the full emotional impact. It is a good thing.

Working Through the Grief

Confronting reality and enduring the wide range of emotions which accompany it are the most difficult part of mourning. Confronting involves exploring what death means. It is an intense period of disorganization which can include:

1. Sadness, confusion, anxiety
2. Powerlessness, loss of control, helplessness
3. Anger at God and injustice in the world
4. Anger toward oneself or the one who was killed
5. Guilt for not being able to prevent the crash
6. Physiological symptoms such as insomnia or indigestion
7. Irritability

Each surviving family member is unique in how he or she works through the pain, but it is necessary eventually to confront it head-on.

Unique Components of Male Grief

From early childhood, males are taught that men should protect their families. Fathers are responsible for fulfilling their wife's and children's physical, financial and emotional needs. They are to be in control, to be strong (never scared), and able to fix things. By adulthood, catapulted into roles they may not particularly have chosen, they become key decision-makers who take care of everything. They sometimes feel they are being torn apart trying to fulfill all the roles that are expected of them. Showing emotions is labeled as weak or pitiful. Men are expected to be strong under adverse circumstances, even when a drunk driving crash involving someone they love has turned their world upside down.

A time frame for working through grief with its accompanying symptoms is not definite or predictable. In some ways, it is different for men and women. The suddenness of the death, the age of the person killed, the degree of violence to the body, and the quality of the relationship are all complicated variables. It is difficult to come to grips with the fact that you did not have the opportunity to say "I love you," "I'm sorry," "Thank you," or "Goodbye." The process involves restructuring and reorganizing life which can include changed goals, different direction or reinvestment in new relationships.

Changed identity can be especially problematic for men, such as from a husband to a single man; from a father to a childless man; from a brother to an only child.

Men tend to assume full responsibility for their bereavement symptoms, almost as if mourning were an illness they need to "get over" as soon as they can. Boys are taught to consciously suppress pain and grief, especially as they engage in physical contact sports. Then, as men, their painful feelings continue to be unconsciously repressed. Repressed grief lasts much longer than acknowledged grief and can lead to complications. For many men, the longer their grief remains repressed, the more reluctant they are to allow it to surface. They know how deep the pain will go if they allow themselves to feel it.

Men are encouraged to take charge, support others, and accept death as a challenge, even a test of masculinity and courage. Facing the pain constitutes a double crisis: the loss itself and the search for instructions or guidelines about how to handle things. Both experiences may be new. Sharing feelings, weeping, and talking about what happened over and over may not feel empowering to men. Their silence is often interpreted by others as withdrawal, mysteriousness, or defensiveness, even lack of caring about the death of their loved one.

Some men keep their thoughts and feelings about the death to themselves. Not saying anything, or saying very little about it, protects them from the vulnerability of expressing their feelings.

While many women choose to take someone with them to visit the gravesite, men are more likely to visit their loved one's grave by themselves. These visits can take the form of private rituals. It is here that many men come to terms with death, mourn, and struggle to accommodate it. Men see mourning in solitude as a choice of strength because it shields others from their pain.

Some men feel that their home has become a symbol of the death and mourning they were unable to prevent. Therefore, they can be very uncomfortable at home and develop a variety of excuses to stay away. Home means hurt, not refuge. Coming home means feeling sad and powerless -- and there is nothing they can do about it. It's out of their control.

"Doing something" seems to help men more than simply talking about it. Physical challenges such as tracking down the prior convictions of the drunk driver, filing a lawsuit, or helping collect evidence for the criminal case can be very useful for men because it puts them in control, at least for the moment. Although interacting with others through the criminal justice system may satisfy the need for activity, anger and frustration usually increase as men learn more about the system's inadequacies. This only adds to their mental anguish, and can result in rage, a drivenness to do something concrete and specific. Some men work longer hours or take more business trips in an effort to "do" something.

Men can be diligent, even obsessive, about occupying their time. Hyperactivity can take other forms including risk-taking behaviors, physical conditioning, sports, and obsessive sexual activity. In moderation, they are not necessarily bad, but if used as substitutes for grief by consuming physical and psychological energy, time and money, they may not be serving you well.

If you find yourself becoming overly involved in activity of one kind or another, honestly evaluate why you are doing it. Thrusting the mind and body into constant motion consumes time, energy and thought. If you are using the preoccupations to avoid experiencing your deepest, most disturbing feelings, you may have to search for the times and places to allow them to surface. Since time-consuming activities are acceptable behaviors for men in our society, you may not get much help or support in seeking solitude.

Many believe that the slightly higher death rate for men than women after the death of a spouse may be the result of this increased activity and repressed grief and mourning. No similar research has been conducted comparing mothers and fathers of a child killed. Physical symptoms include increased cholesterol levels, ulcers, higher blood pressure, asthma, and depression.

Avoidance of open expression of grief-related feelings can also lead to escalating anger. Men may feel constantly angry at doctors, their spouse, their surviving children, the law enforcement agency, God, the world in general, even themselves. Anger can set up a barrier against the pain. When anger blocks out feelings of sadness, grief work is difficult to accomplish.

After an extended suppression of grief, some men's addictive behaviors escalate, such as abuse of alcohol and other drugs. Addictions increase among both grieving men and women, but more so among men. The addiction numbs painful emotions. Since alcohol and other drugs reduce judgment, angry outbursts can become frequent, adding to family chaos. Men who become dependent on alcohol or other drugs are working their way toward other death rather than working through their grief.

As you reflect on this, you may find that you are using some of these coping strategies. Although very common, they do not relieve the grief. Hopefully, you can recognize these unhealthy

symptoms, evaluate their purpose, and understand that you must now deal with your grief squarely rather than avoiding it.

The Death of a Child

If your mate is at home and you have gone back to work, she may feel isolated and engulfed in pain and suffering. As you witness her anguish, you may feel pressured to "fix" the situation by giving "answers" and offering "shoulds." These attempts, while noble, usually fail. You may sense things are getting out of control which is very frustrating because you feel responsible for holding the relationship together. You sometimes feel totally helpless. Always capable of supporting her previously, she now seem inconsolable. You decide that the best you can do is remain strong and try to control what is going on inside yourself, so the rest of the family can lean on you. You conclude that if you start to fall apart or lose control, then everything will deteriorate even further.

Ironically, it is this very well-intentioned pseudo-strength that most irritates grieving women. They prefer that their husbands join them in their grieving -- even though their husband's despair can also be frightening to them. A perceived need to "be strong" is common and, unfortunately, causes many fathers to post-pone their grief work until they think it is safe, until other family members begin to feel better, or until they simply cannot control the upheaval inside themselves any longer.

As you grieve your child's death, you may blame yourself with irrational conclusions:

- "I was not protective enough."
- "I did not love enough."
- "I was too preoccupied with concerns about myself, my career and my needs."
- "I did not spend enough time with my child."
- "I shouldn't have gotten a divorce and left the family."

Guilt is an emotion which arises from the need to blame so we don't have to acknowledge the randomness of danger. Feeling helpless may seem worse than feeling responsible.

On the other hand, if there is some legitimate reason for guilt, it must be confronted. Finding a tangible way to try to make amends and forgive yourself is a useful strategy for coping with legitimate guilt.

Irrational guilt should be acknowledged but then discarded as quickly as possible. Many say that, for awhile, choosing to feel guilty feels like a way to express love. That may be useful for awhile, but it will become burdensome if carried too long.

You may have felt some ambivalence toward your child before he or she was killed. Perhaps your son or daughter did not carry out your dreams, did not share your values, did not do well in school, did not stay out of trouble, or did not have a close relationship with you. Feelings of ambivalence are a natural, inevitable part of all human relationships. It is important to acknowledge that there is good and bad in all of us. Remembering realistically is one goal of grief work. It takes time and courage.

Obviously, communication between bereaved mothers and fathers is difficult. Labeling your wife's grief style, such as telling her you think her talking about your child's death is hysterical, obsessive, or morbid, is not useful. These statements broaden the communication gap. Your wife may not want you to fix her feelings. If you tell her she should be feeling better by now, you may find yourself in an argument as she expresses her resentment of you. Being honest with your own emotions, including your feelings of helplessness when you want to be protective, is more productive. She may find it a wonderful gift if you are willing to both share your own grief and to listen to hers.

If you work full-time and your wife works part-time or is at home all day, you will likely experience the initial grieving periods differently. Your required interactions with other people, along with job related responsibilities and stresses, demand your attention and performance, making it unlikely that you will concentrate exclusively on your loss. Your grieving may be more intermittent than your wife's.

When the work responsibilities and social situations of the spouses differ, and when communication gaps exist, distancing likely occurs. If you and your wife can no longer function as a team, you have to find a common ground. Regardless of the specific changes in your marriage, one outcome is certain: Your relationship will not be the same as it was before your child was killed. It may grow stronger. It may change in emphasis, direction, or quality. It may even fall apart. Some marriages do fail after the death of a child, but most of those that fail were already in trouble before the child was killed. Being aware of the major factors which are changing your relationship can be the first step toward preventing more break-down.

Needs for intimacy and sex pose a problem for many grieving couples. There is no "appropriate" abstinence period which should be observed before resuming your sexual relationship. Abstaining from sexual intimacy is not a healthy way to prove your love for your deceased child. You will need to reestablish intimacy that is emotionally, mentally, and physically satisfying to both of you. Many women are able to enjoy intercourse only when they are feeling good. Grieving significantly decreases their desire. It may take a considerable amount of time for the two of you to readjust. Above all, communicate your needs honestly and openly.

The entire family relationship changes after the death of a child. Deciding whether or not to have other children is stressful. Additional conflict can arise in a marriage in which one or both parents have children from a former marriage. In these cases, they may not wish to subject the second marriage and the spouse's children to the possibility of another loss. On the other hand, many families find an additional child to be a special blessing, as long as it is not intended as a replacement for the child who was killed.

Both you and your wife may tend to become overprotective of your surviving children. It is difficult to allow a surviving child the freedom it takes to mature while at the same time creating a safety net to try to prevent harm. Parents may disagree about what surviving children are allowed to do. You may feel that they are demanding too much of their mother's attention, leaving little time for herself or for you. Your wife may feel that you are sabotaging their social and emotional development. The children may think that both parents have pulled the reins in too tightly. If they feel that you loved the dead child more than them, they can become depressed and rebellious. A family meeting where each shares what he or she thinks the others are feeling allows for misunderstandings and can result in the development of reasonable alternative behaviors.

One issue seldom discussed following the death of a child is each spouse's physical appearance and demeanor serving as painful physical reminders of the deceased child. Certain looks and expressions can trigger a grief spasm as you "see" the child in your spouse. There is no way to diminish these small shocks except the passage of time. Eventually, seeing the same physical characteristics and mannerisms in your partner will produce a less pronounced response. Both parents will continue to be "living reminders," but the similarities to the deceased child will eventually become endurable, and with time, treasured attributes.

Previous differences in values and beliefs between you and your mate will likely become more apparent following the death. For example, one partner may begin to attend church and seek solace in religious literature. The other may question religion, lose faith, and turn from spirituality entirely. One may withdraw, seek solitary situations and avoid involvement in police investigations, prosecution, or publicity connected to the death. The other may decide to become actively involved, even speaking publicly about the dangers of drinking and driving. You will need to practice patience and tolerance in allowing each other to grieve in your own way.

The Death of a Parent

If you are surviving the death of your mother and/or father, you are probably experiencing:

- Abandonment
- Vulnerability
- Frustration

- A foreboding sense of your own death

The death of your mother is the loss of the person who shaped your early years, who taught you how to walk, to talk, and to behave. Your mother may have been the primary communicator, mediator, or confidante in the family. If so, you now might have difficulty interacting with your father who makes simple conversation a laborious process.

If your father died, you may feel driven to find out more about him. Since many fathers are emotionally unavailable for the greater portion of their sons' lives, they have little knowledge, if any, of their fathers' emotional needs and gifts. It isn't surprising that when fathers die, the mementos kept by their sons are objects that were work-related or sports and nature-related, rather than things which recall emotional attachment.

Another somewhat unsettling dimension of your father's death may be coming to grips with release from your father's control. If you were unfortunate enough to have suffered throughout your lifetime because of his control over your use of money, power, or position, you may feel a puzzling combination of relief coupled with fear and anxiety. The same confusion can emerge even if your father controlled in less direct ways through manipulation, expectations, subtle guidance, or favoritism shown toward another sibling. Some say that a boy can grow into a man only when his father dies.

If you had a warm, supportive relationship with your father, you may feel vulnerable, even frightened, without his counsel. In an instant you become the "older generation" and you fear you lack your father's wisdom. Don't worry. These feelings are natural, and, in time, you will realize how much of your father you have assimilated into yourself.

An adolescent boy whose father dies, especially the oldest son in the family, sometimes gets the message that he is now "in charge," and must carry out the legacy of being the head of the family. This is uncomfortable for an adult son, and even more so for an adolescent. His perceived or real burden can result in physical or emotional rebellion.

If your father has died, you may find yourself wandering through the house, careful not to let your grief show, acknowledging your new role as protector. You may think you should not mention the death because it will add to others' sadness. You will be fortunate if you can find another male to assure you that sharing your feelings with him is welcomed. Sadly, the most available confidante for many male adolescent survivors is their girlfriend. Her willingness to listen, her sympathy, and her affection can feel like a safer environment for him than his own family. However, you, your remaining parent and your siblings will do well to grieve together and plan together as a team in coping with your parent's death. Look for other males in your family -- or outside your family -- who can accept your grief and feelings of vulnerability.

The Death of a Wife or Partner

If your spouse or partner died, you may find yourself contending with painful emotions and reactions you never dreamed possible. You may feel guilty for not showing your affection or recognizing the depth of your love. You may torment yourself by replaying scenes in which you failed to convey your love or ease your wife/partner's load. You feel as if an essential part of yourself has been destroyed or removed. Men have said "I feel like part of me was ripped away," or "I feel half of me will forever be gone and I'll never be the same."

You may discover for the first time how many facets of your life were dependent upon your mate's presence. You have lost your domestic partner, your sexual partner, and your primary companion.

Even though you may have shared the cooking, helped with shopping, or vacuumed once in a while, you now have to manage all the domestic responsibilities. You may discover that you have to ask for help -- which feels uncomfortable. If children are still in the home, you must be responsive and sensitive to their emotional needs, understanding how grieving affects them at their different developmental levels. You now must see that their schedules are met, clothes maintained, home-work completed, and appointments kept.

Most men have strong feelings about losing their sexual partner. You can find yourself plagued by disturbing sexual fears such as "How long should I wait before I'm with another person?" or "Will I be able to satisfy a new partner?" Some widowers decide that they must now become impotent, as if that is the inevitable outcome of losing their sexual partner. While the fear of impotency can be very real, physiological impotency is extremely rare. Grieving can cause temporary impotence, but it usually isn't permanent and subsides during the grieving experience. You may feel the need for emotional intensity, kissing, hugging, affection, and tenderness. Many widowed men feel they cannot experience such intimacy unless it also includes sexual intercourse. That is not true.

You also miss your mate as a life companion. In fact, your spouse may have been the only emotional companion you have had for many years. Facing the world with no emotional companion is more difficult than most men realize.

In summary, regardless of whether your child, parent, or mate was killed, your life is now indelibly changed. You lost a part of yourself and a part of your future. But it will get better than it now is. You will continue to learn new things about yourself over time, and you may even enhance your relationship with others as a result of your painful pilgrimage. The more deeply sorrow has carved its chasm in your heart, the deeper is your capacity for compassion.