

BOOK REVIEW

In **Tuesday Mornings with the Dads** we read 14 stories about how sons and daughters died suddenly in the line of duty, by cardiac arrest, by murder, by an accident in a car or drowning, or hit by a car as a pedestrian. Others died by their own hand after a long and painful struggle with addiction, mental illness or developmental disorder. It was a courageous book to write, but the book would have never been written if two men depressed about their child's death hadn't found each other. More men joined them. They formed a group with practically no format other than a safe place to cry as they told "their story", and wondered together what the future held for them.

I would have no hesitation recommending this book to a parent grieving the loss of a child. The book is not at all in the typical self-help genre. There are no bulleted lists. There is a "collective wisdom" about coping with traumatic loss, particularly about normalizing feelings that are not easily understood by others (e.g. wanting to avoid family gatherings; having great difficulty handling simple questions by strangers such as "How many children do you have?"). This short book was anything but a "quick read" for me. The stories are terribly honest. In gut-wrenching detail, we learn how these men's lives changed. Their children's deaths stir insecurity in most parents because it presents a reality that no parent, father or mother, ever wants to face. One of my friends wrote a chapter in the Dads book. Two of my colleagues lost their sons (one in a car accident on the way to school and the other who was killed as a pedestrian by a drunk driver). The loss of a child has not been part of my life.

Reading this book can be educational to mental health professionals, as well. We learn about some common themes for fathers grieving the loss of a child. We also learn about resilience. The traumatic loss is balanced by the hopeful message of how men supporting each other helped ease their depression.

The book has a group photo with smiling faces. But it is a group, they remind us, that no man ever wants to join. We learn what brings these men together to share their stories is unrelenting pain that wives, prayer, work, friends and mental health professionals could not easily understand or alleviate. Each of these 14 men came to believe that when they shared their loss, over coffee on Tuesday morning, they are not alone. There were Dads that completely understood how they felt. When a newcomer joined the group, it was a chance for them to re-tell their story, and to share their tears as a way of bonding with the newcomer who was reeling with emotion. This emotional bonding is deeply healing to a psyche that is numbed by shock and pain. This book does not have "male" flavor, yet a careful reading helps the professional learn about the blocks that men have recovering from traumatic loss. Men interpret their role as father in many ways, but most fathers would agree they are supposed to protect the family from harm. These men would have given their life to protect their child. A child's death

causes overwhelming pain for men because they are the protectors.

Men learn to suppress their emotions because it can be adaptive...except when it isn't. Being hurt in an athletic contest is not a time to cry. In the forward to the book, a famous pro football coach, Tony Dungy, shares his story of recovery after he lost his young son in a drug-related death. The choice of a coach to write the forward speaks to how deep the concept of "playing hurt" is for men. Being in a support group offered these men an outlet for suppressed emotion. But the group also promoted a healthy coping skill: giving full reign to painful thoughts and feelings to others who can be trusted promotes growth of resilience of character. There is insight to be gained about what resilience looks like in response to traumatic loss. Having support persons in your life is healing on a physical level (see the classic paper by Sidney Cobb in 1976) and common sense wisdom in the literature on resilience. And yet, it is a reasonable question as to why men in this book talked about their reluctance about being in a support group ("I'll try it one time."). Part of the problem is that friends and family, not attuned to trauma, fail to appreciate how distancing from others is a way to cope with overwhelming pain. Distancing, and the underlying psychic numbing which causes it, protects the trauma victim from emotional flooding. A theme in the stories was how well-meaning friends "don't get it". There was a suggestion of two meanings to this experience. On the one hand, there is a sense of gratitude that men in the group who did "get it"; on the other hand, talking to persons who "don't get it" can add to the grief. Understanding psychic numbing involves understanding memory. Self disclosure leads to remembering their child, and that is terribly painful. One father regularly reads the obituaries, and for him a "good day" is when there are no children who have passed away that day to provoke a painful memory. Parallels are found among those with "survivor guilt", an experience first observed among Holocaust survivors. Combat veterans don't want to talk about what horrified them.

Compared to symptoms of "re-experiencing" (e.g. nightmares) and jumpiness or hyper-arousal, psychic numbing is thought to be the most reliable indicator of PTSD. These men give professionals real-world examples of how psychic numbing following trauma evolves into depression and why having a shoulder to cry on may be more healing than anti-depressant medications or getting counseling on the "stages of grieving a loss". Depression sets in because not remembering invalidates the attachment to their dear child. This creates a state of emotional confusion. Remembering is too shocking, but not remembering is profoundly sad. It is the prototype problem for anyone in a crisis. For those who know about the Rorschach, it is a color-shading blend. Each chapter has a picture of their dear child who died. The pictures are a powerful tribute to their attachment. Including the picture suggests that these men have resolved the loss enough so they are less upset by memories. They will readily admit, as one father wrote, that the loss is not "something to get over". The loss can't be

escaped by work or replaced by other children because it is an irreplaceable loss. There is a hole in their hearts that cannot be filled. But these men have painfully come to find a way to live with this heartache, without cutting themselves off from the joy that living life may give them. These men developed a capacity to care for one another as brothers. This was evident in their dedication of the book to a group member who died. Good deeds were done to promote social welfare (e.g. alerting the public to railroad crossings that needed improvement). Their common purpose is to find ways “that good may come from tragedy”, and their website (www.tuesdayswiththedads.org) provides examples. Their caring was most clear in how they went out of their way to comfort fathers mourning a profound loss. Ψ

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