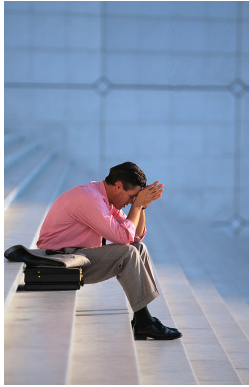


# GriefConnections

## Unique Challenges of Grieving Dads

by William G. Hoy



Bereaved fathers, almost everyone in grief work would agree, can present special challenges to counselors and others offering support. Because much early research into bereavement focused on widowed women, models of “effective” grieving tended to focus on the emotionally-expressive approaches, largely dismissing the coping strategies of those who did not “share emotion” so easily. Moreover, authors who attempted to make sense of grieving male-types accepted the then-in-vogue notion that males were “like they were” largely because of social conditioning, and worse, personality defects.

Unfortunately, many of these notions are dying a slow death! Even some research projects uncritically accept the notions that

men are culturally-conditioned to be unexpressive, rather than exploring the often-effective ways some men use to cope with bereavement. Much recent work with men and adolescent boys has begun to show another way of looking at this group, providing increasingly male-friendly approaches to psychotherapy and counseling (Gurian, 1996; Horne & Kiselica, 1999; Kiselica, 2003; Martin & Wang, 2006; and Wexler, 2009). Moreover, the groundbreaking work of Doka & Martin (2010) has begun shattering some of the deeply-held myths about what it means to truly grieve effectively.

So what is a clinician to do, especially in light of conventional training that highly values a client’s ability to express affect in words? Over the last few years when more of my time has been dedicated to reading, reflection and teaching, as well as in the earlier years of my career when I worked so regularly with bereaved couples after the deaths of children, I believe there are some important guidelines as we attempt to support bereaved dads. Here is the shape of my thinking now.

### Value instrumental styles

as highly as intuitive ones. The work of Ken Doka and Terry Martin (2010) referenced above was among the first to theorize that there was an acceptable “other way” to effectively grieve. Instrumental grievers, in their schematic, place cognitions over affect, tend to “take action” in their grief and will usually choose adaptive activities over talking out their feelings. While the research evidence is still being gathered to support their theory, much clinical, anecdotal evidence points to the rightness of their way of thinking.

**Model a blend of emotional language and task accomplishment.** What helps many North American men is a patient teaching of emotional language. When necessary, help these grieving dads to label such common emotions as fear, sadness, anger, loneliness and guilt. Invite the dad to define what he thinks the word means, how he would become aware that emotion was present in his life, and what to do with it to express it in healthy, life-affirming and relationship-building ways. Journaling is an exceptional tool for this development, but men who have never practiced the art will benefit from some writing prompts to help them (Hoy, 2007, p. 42-44).



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## Unique Challenges of Grieving Dads con't

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**Patiently teach communication skills.** Doka & Martin (2010) urge counselors to “counter the destructive myths that the death of a child greatly increases the risk of divorce, almost making it inevitable.” This myth, they and many others assert, is not borne out by the evidence. Though problematic in some of its methodology, the research completed by Alam, Barrera, D’Agostino, Nicholas & Schneiderman (2012) reviewed below suggests as many as 40% of their survey participants indicated actual improvement in the relationship with their spouse in the time since a child’s death (p. 15). But almost certainly poor communication patterns prior to a child’s death will not magically improve during grief, making the assessment of communication skills and the refinement and teaching of new skills of paramount concern for counselors working with all grieving parents.

**Celebrate adaptive activities.** Frequently, I fear, we in the mental health field have developed a list of “approved coping strategies.” Too often, the adaptive “taking action” to accomplish tasks is relegated to the “unhelpful strategies” list. This should not be. Whether energy is invested in finding a cure for disease, beginning an organization to fight drunk driving and drug use, building a memorial planter in the backyard in a child’s memory, or arresting the threat of violence, these kinds of legacy-building, world-enhancing tasks need to be celebrated when our clients choose them.

Obviously, any task can become a “hiding place” from effective grief work, but more often than not, these efforts are not an attempt so much to hide from the pain as they are a way to manage the experience. In the end, how the client is functioning in his environment and how he is managing his own mental, physical and spiritual health is the only reliable measure of whether or not his coping strategies are effective or unhelpful.

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### The Author:

William G. Hoy is a counselor, author and educator with more than 25 years of experience in walking with the bereaved and equipping the professionals and volunteers who care for them. In addition to a vigorous schedule in clinical consultation, Dr. Hoy teaches in the graduate program in bereavement at Marian University and in the Medical Humanities program, College of Arts and Sciences at Baylor University. He blogs at [www.griefconnect.wordpress.com](http://www.griefconnect.wordpress.com).

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## *Grief Center of the Southern Tier*

The Grief Center of the Southern Tier is a nonprofit organization located in Painted Post, New York. The Grief Center helps families and individuals through the grieving process by talking with them, spending time with them and by giving them coping skills to help them through their journey.

The Grief Center's services are provided at no cost to the individuals and families who are grieving. It is supported through donations from local churches and funeral homes. The Center accepts donations from individuals and businesses to help defray costs associated with helping families.

The Grief Center receives referrals from churches, funeral homes, schools and doctors. The Grief Center also works in conjunction with Hospice, helping prepare individuals and families for the pending death.

## *Library Notes*

### **Lament for a Son**

Wolterstorff, N. (1987). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

You will read many books written from the depths of parental grief before you will find one with this level of insight. Wolterstorff, now a retired philosopher and theologian from Yale, crisply shares his pilgrimage following the death of his 25-year old son, Eric, in a mountain climbing accident. I (WGH) read more

Educational seminars are available on the topic of Grief and Suicide, Dealing with Grief in Schools and Dealing with Grief in the Workplace. On site Support Groups are available as well as on site individual grief counseling.

Each year, the Grief Center is involved in many events in the community. They have worked with the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention on the Annual Suicide Prevention Walk. Also each year, The Grief Center, along with Phillips Funeral Home and Cremation Service and Carpenter's Funeral Home LLC, hosts the Annual Candle Lighting Service of Remembrance, honoring loved ones who have passed away.

The Grief Center's Executive Director is Sandi Follette. Sandi has been a certified Grief Counselor for 14 years. She feels

than 100 grief books every year; this is the first in a while that I found myself reaching for a pen to underline and comment before I ended the first dozen pages.

Where I have been all these years to not have already discovered this 15-year old gem, I cannot tell. Tearing a page from the playbook of C.S. Lewis' *A Grief Observed*—and about as brief at only 110 pages—Wolterstorff

strongly that no one should grieve alone. "Grief is such a life changing event in so many ways. Many people do not realize how healthy it is to talk about their pain. It prevents many other issues later in life."

The Grief Center serves Steuben, Chemung and Schuyler counties along with a few surrounding counties. For more information or to contact Sandi at The Grief Center of the Southern Tier, please call 607-936-9077.



**SANDI FOLLETTE  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
OF THE GRIEF  
CENTER OF THE**

“THE GRIEF  
CENTER RECEIVES  
REFERRALS FROM  
CHURCHES,  
FUNERAL HOMES,  
SCHOOLS AND  
DOCTORS.”

writes in an uncharacteristic way for a scholar. He writes first as a grieving dad and then as a philosopher/theologian.

To learn more about **Lament for a Son** or purchase it, go to [www.barnesandnoble.com](http://www.barnesandnoble.com) or [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).

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*It is the mission of Phillips Funeral Home & Cremation Service to facilitate meaningful ways for families to grieve their loss and celebrate the memories of their loved ones. We will do this by providing information, options, and guidance with the highest level of competence, courtesy and compassion. We will provide respectful and affordable funeral, cremation and memorialization services in a comfortable environment, always striving to exceed the expectations of each family we serve.*

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HONORING MEMORIES**

*Local Support Groups*



**Loss of a Spouse Support Group**

For more information, contact Sandi Follette at the Grief Center of The Southern Tier at 607-936-9077.

**Loss of a Loved One to Suicide**

For more information, contact Sandi Follette at The Grief Cen-

ter of the Southern Tier at 607-936-9077.

**Compassionate Friends Support Group**

Last Wednesday of each month at 7 pm at Our Saviours Lutheran Church, 2872 Westinghouse Road, Horseheads. If you are interested in joining the group, contact Joann at 562-8090 or by email at [jmorgan55@stny.rr.com](mailto:jmorgan55@stny.rr.com).

**Abortion**

Forgiven and Set Free—a post-abortion class. For more information contact Victory Highway Wesleyan Church at 607-962-7000.

**Infant Loss**

The SHARE Infant Loss Bereavement Support Group meets the third Thursday of every month at 7 pm in the Clute Education Building at Arnot Ogden Medical Center and is for parents, grandparents, family and friends of persons who have lost children through miscarriage or stillbirth. Contact Marianne Amisano at 607-562-8856 for more information.

*For more local support groups go to [www.phillipsfuneralhome.com](http://www.phillipsfuneralhome.com).*

*“There is a sacredness in tears. They are not the mark of weakness, but of power. They speak more eloquently than ten thousand tongues. They are messengers of overwhelming grief, of deep contrition, and of unspeakable love.”*

*Washington Irving*



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