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Fathers grieve too: Making the invisible, visible through football



A post from the Stillbirth Advocacy Working Group stillbirth series by Kerry Jones, PhD.

“DADS ARE MEANT TO BE THE ROCK AND THE STRONG ONE AND ALL THOSE KINDS OF CLICHÉS. SO I WOULD SAY THE FOCUS IS MORE ON THE MUM, BUT WE’RE SLIGHTLY FORGOTTEN IN THE WHOLE PROCESS AND LEFT TO OUR OWN DEVICES A LITTLE BIT.”

As this narrative from a research [study](#) of bereaved fathers suggests (written by the author and colleagues), many fathers experience deep sorrow following stillbirth and neonatal death, an impact which is less talked about or acknowledged than the impact on mothers. One of the main findings of

research that focuses on father's experience of pregnancy loss is that men tend to be less emotionally expressive. Yet such a lack of emotion is closely linked with cultural and social expectations about what it is to be "manly"; that is, to be stoic, supportive and a "rock" for the family and to get on with it despite the ramifications of such a devastating loss and the potential consequences to fathers' mental health.

Our international scoping **review** concerning fathers' experience of loss following stillbirth and neonatal death demonstrated how important it is for men to have their identity as a father acknowledged. Following the death of their baby, many fathers spoke about being overlooked by health care providers who are more focused on the mother's welfare. Support for mothers is clearly important and was endorsed by many of the fathers in our study. However, this focus on the mother to the exclusion of fathers can negatively affect fathers' mental health and is compounded by the lack of acknowledgement of their loss by the wider community, and can even result in stigma.

So, what constitutes best practice for provision of support to bereaved fathers? Some fathers find their own resources or ways of coping, such as keeping busy at work, suppressing their grief by avoiding it, or numbing their emotions with substance use. Others turn to sport even if they are not very good at it. For example, some fathers have founded football teams for bereaved fathers, uncles, and grandfathers after the death of a baby. These teams provide a community of loss and one which is based on shared experiences even if the stories of how the losses occurred are slightly different.

In these sports teams, fathers can feel and have a space and a location to share their loss even if it is via a text or What's App message. What is important for these fathers is validation, acknowledgement and remembering their baby as a part of the family and community. They do this by wearing the team's football shirt with the baby's name on the shirt front and by holding a minute's silence before a game. It doesn't matter if they lose the match. What they gain is their sense of identity as a father, and a sense of their baby in their life:

"IT'S THE TEAM NOBODY WANTS TO JOIN, BUT WHEN YOU JOIN IT'S A TEAM YOU'LL NEVER LEAVE BECAUSE OF THE SUPPORT. I PLAY FOR MY DAUGHTER. SOMETIMES I JUST DON'T KNOW WHAT I'M FEELING BECAUSE I'VE BEEN LOOKING AFTER OTHER PEOPLE... NOT THAT I HAVEN'T LOOKED AFTER MYSELF, BUT GETTING THIS SUPPORT FROM THE TEAM, ATTENTION IF I SCORE A GOAL, I AM JUST ENGULFED BY THE WHOLE TEAM, IT WAS LIKE WE'D WON THE WORLD CUP."

While football works for some, for others it is running or a different physical activity. For many bereaved fathers involved in this special type of sports activity, it is for the same goal: to remember,

and to raise awareness of the extent of this loss, which impacts far too many. Ultimately, the goal is to lift the lid on an often-ignored experience of loss which people across the globe live with each day.

This post from a member of the [Stillbirth Advocacy Working Group \(SAWG\)](#) reflects the perspective of the author alone; it does not represent the views of the SAWG. The Stillbirth Advocacy Working Group was founded by the Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health, and is co-chaired by the International Stillbirth Alliance and the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine. Email co-chairs Hannah Blencowe or Susannah Leisher at sawg@stillbirthalliance.org to join SAWG or to learn more about the group.

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