

*Supporting parents after bereavement*

# A dad's grief



*What helped us...*

# A dad's grief

*“There’s so many emotions going through you. You’ve anger and rage, fear, loss... You don’t know what you’re actually feeling in the beginning. You just can’t put a name on it. And you just feel... so frightened I suppose.”*

## *Bereaved Dad*

### **You are not alone**

A bomb has gone off in your life; and still every day the sun comes up and life must be faced.

At times, it feels like you’re dead inside and just going through the motions of living. At the worst of times, you feel like you’re drowning or teetering on the edge of an abyss.

A simple thing like a puncture can destroy your day.

We have been there too. We wrote this leaflet so that you know that you are not alone. We have all experienced the

pain and despair, the dark thoughts and ferocious anger, and the fear in the very pit of our stomachs.

What we offer here are ways of getting through – that some of us found helpful. But there is no formula. We all grieve differently. If you can take one thing from this leaflet, that is enough.

### **What helped us in the early days**

#### **“I use my brother as a bodyguard”**

Lean on your support networks. Let others you are comfortable with take over practical things around the house and in your working life.

If you can, find a friend or close relative who can keep difficult people at a distance.

Some people, even those closest to us, say the most insensitive things. In time you see it coming and learn to let it go.

It's important to let your work know how you feel. There is no shame in this. If you can't approach your boss, confide in a close colleague to do it for you. But it is wise to tell them.

### Trust yourself

Listen to your instinct, the inner voice that says:

- "I want out of this room";
- "I don't want to see these people now";
- "I need to sit down"; or
- "I need a break from work".

Be careful about committing to activities you might not feel up to seeing through. Have an escape route. Mind yourself – you don't owe anybody anything.

*"Try to be selfish. Do as much as you can for yourself. Because by nature you're going to help your family anyway. To be there for them you need to be kind to yourself too."*

Be careful before making big life or work decisions or drastic changes. Stay

in your comfort zone wherever and whenever that is.

### Be active

Any activity at all is good – exercise or any physical activity (perhaps one that wears you out).

### Give yourself space

Find your own space – maybe a park, beach, church, shed or woods. Somewhere you can have your moment.

### Walk

Go for walks, no need for a destination. Be outside in nature, breathe deeply and feel alive.

### Get away

Take little trips to safe, undemanding places you already know.

### Keep doing it

Whatever ritual you find that helps you cope, no matter how bizarre or unexpected, if it works for you, keep doing it.

*"There is no choice but to evolve a new normal. You will find that you are able for more than you imagine."*

## Getting through as time goes on

### Professional help

If you find someone compassionate (through, say, work or your GP), trust them to listen and suggest things that might help.

Know that a counsellor is only there to walk a while with you. They will try their best to listen and support, but accept that they won't have all the answers.

Don't be afraid, as a man, to show vulnerability, to open up. Be able to say you're hurting. Let yourself cry. Don't bury it.

*"A father can't bottle it all up. Fair play to the man that can do it, but I know that he won't. You have to let that emotion out."*

### At home

Maintain empathy for your partner even when you can't understand each other. We all grieve differently. Listen to each other or just be together if there are no words. You can be each other's source of strength through this.

If you have other children, allow yourself to be sad around them and tell them

why. There is nothing wrong with thoughts about trying for another child at some point in the future. Trust yourself to know what feels right and discuss it as a couple at an appropriate time.

### Keep busy

Keep busy with small projects or challenges undertaken with your child in your heart, for example:

- gardening,
- jogging,
- education, or
- courses.

Being anonymous around strangers can be a relief.

### "To honour you, I get up each day"

Cherish the happy memories and wonderful moments, and your child's personality. Know that they will live on in your heart. Write down some of the things you remember your child saying – even their silliest quotes.

Display photos of your child and leave things that remind you of your child around your home so that you see them.

Celebrate your child's life and do so moving forward. Mark things like birthdays.

# Supporting parents after bereavement

Take every opportunity to speak about your child. If asked how many children you have, don't deny him or her. Tell people about them.

Attend memorials. Tell your story, even publicly. Fundraise in your child's name. Some of us speak to our child, or we write them letters.

Take strength and inspiration from your child and try to make a positive difference in your own life or in that of others. Consider performing random acts of kindness or service to others.

## Living in the here and now

The past is too painful, the future scary and uncertain. Safety is in the present.

*"Sometimes I just sit alone in a room and recognise that now, in this very moment, nothing can hurt me."*

Be kind to yourself. Allow yourself to savour moments.

Meditation and 'mindfulness' (living in the moment) can help with this.

Nature and outdoor activities can also be a source of strength.

Know that your priorities are likely to change. Go with that.

**Those who understand grief are those who have experienced it. Consider attending an Anam Cara Parent Evening or Bereavement Information Event. You won't regret it.**

*"I had nobody to talk to who knew how I was really feeling... More than anything else it has given me a sense of hope and shown me a way to participate in the world again. I am not exaggerating when I say that Anam Cara saved my life."*

*"There are days when the pain will hit you unexpectedly like a train and there is nothing you can do but try to find somewhere quiet to grieve and let it out, pull yourself together and head back out into the world of the non-bereaved. You can't tell them because they wouldn't understand but I don't feel isolated anymore, I can always call or email one of the parents from Anam Cara and they will listen and respond because they know."*

Anam Cara is an all-Ireland organisation providing online and face-to-face peer support services to bereaved parents. The death of a child of any age and through any circumstances is devastating.

Everyone in the family will deal differently with their grief and may need different types of support. Initially that support will be your extended family, friends or a professional.

However, as time passes, know that groups like Anam Cara are available to provide a safe and comfortable place for you to access information and speak to other bereaved parents.

Visit our website to view the Anam Cara Information Videos. These involve interviews with bereaved parents and include a video on 'A Dad's Grief'.

We would like to thank the parents associated with Anam Cara Northern Ireland, as well as other dads in the Anam Cara network, for their contribution to this leaflet.



## Anam Cara Parental and Sibling Bereavement Support

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