

## Fifth Newsletter

21<sup>st</sup> August 2017

I want to talk to the men of the group so therefore this about women and for the women as well. I was recalling this week how I felt when I was told as a Dad that our 9-year-old son Brendan was going to die and what entered my head and what didn't. As to what did or did not enter my "heart, soul or emotions" others may have varying opinions. I certainly can recall all of it but I suspect not in the order that it was perceived by myself and reflected or inflicted on my family and friends. I know that I was stunned, very angry at everyone, particularly at the ineptitude of the medical profession, hurt, scared - no terrified, hostile, dodged denial but anger quickly merged with rage. I felt helpless and hopeless, unloved, couldn't sleep, lonely, isolated and in intense emotional pain.

Getting weepy over it was not what us men do as we have to be strong and carry the family through and that was that. Strangely when I did see my mates all they wanted to do was cheer me up and talk about sport, girls and tell the obligatory jokes. It didn't make feel all that strong. I just felt sadder and as if they didn't really care. I realised what I really wanted was a hug or at least some form of recognition that I must be hurting inside and surely it is not natural for your friends just to ignore that? I was aware from experience with other sad situations amongst the group that this was really what we all did. It was like a genetically inherited distraction trait determined at birth and validated and presented by each of us at the moment a male friend met with any form of suffering. I experienced the female form later when, often after opening the door for visitors, they would enquire about the welfare of our son, daughter or my wife but never how are you feeling Bob?

How was I going to spend what short time that I had left with Brendan and still work? I had to work and work took me at least 3 hours away – one way. How was I going to handle this as a Dad and Husband? The inbuilt "male fixer gene" presented in full bloom and it took over everyone around me as if somehow its presentation and obedience to it would change it all and I as the man had the plan. After all isn't that what we men were born to do? Most surprisingly I have to report that it just didn't quite achieve what I thought it would have and there was no back up gene. I guess that is Y we only have one of them.

What I eventually came to realise was that I had run head on into the oldest reality on this planet and that is we all Live, Love and we all Die. The impending death of Brendan was surely the cruellest and most unfair of life's experiences that could be dealt out to a family. I soon came to realise that there was no manual for this situation and very little meaningful support from those who have been breaking this news to families for countless years. At the point of diagnosis our grief starts and I am not sure that we register it as such then. Grief is really all about losing something we love. The depth of that love is proportional to our grief which seems a very dirty trick to play upon anyone. It starts when we first become aware of an impending loss for at that very moment we lose many things, our future plans, aspirations, hallmarks and hopes etc.

I came to realise the powerful value of the female network and how their openness to their feelings, fears and tears are powerful anodynes in handling their emotional and physical pain and distress. So, men, shall we start at one of their powerful pain killers and open declarations of their love – tears.

Washington Irving's great words:

**"There is a sacredness in tears. They are not the mark of weakness, but of power. They speak more eloquently than 10,000 tongues. They are the messengers of overwhelming grief, of deep contrition, and of unspeakable love".**

Whilst I know we are getting better at openly showing our feelings and crying we still have a way to go men. I think that the family system we come from still influences how we manage our pain and grief. As men, we often seem to isolate and be isolated in this grief process. The attention can be seen as mainly directed towards our wife and the females in the family and questions regarding their welfare are common whilst it is often assumed that we are strong and are handling this tragedy as we should. We often send visible signs that we are in control and are upholding our family unit as is expected when we are internally screaming in pain.

I would just like to raise a few questions for you to consider and how you might be able to receive some comforting support by sharing your pain with those that you desperately want to but may fear you may be seen as "weak".

1. How do you really feel?
2. How well do your loved ones understand these feelings?
3. What roles are you playing?
4. Who determined those roles?
5. How are you coping?
6. How are you expressing your grief?
7. Are you a silent mourner?

I found myself “playing” the old 3 P’s roles? Protector, Provider and Procreator? I was unaware that I was playing these roles and I think that we all play some of these roles by necessity and or by choice. The pressures that are applied in these roles come from our upbringing, society’s expectations and our own choices. How often did I consider these roles and their significance? Rarely, I suspect at the time and it was only later after hitting the proverbial brick wall of futility that I realised how alienating these roles can be.

Our coping styles are different and I think we have mutually skewed perceptions of how each gender is coping or should cope. For example, the women in our lives may think we are void of emotion, unable or unwilling to talk about our anguish and have no feelings or words for our grief. I believe that we soon realise that our women can talk more easily about their feelings and are willing to openly share their tears, sobs and cries. I suspect many women wonder if we are capable of grief at all as I also suspect some men may wish a lessening of their tears and retelling of the tragedy.

It would appear that we have a different language for our grief. I raise the fixer gene again; we tend to rationalise our grief through thinking and follow this as our lead. Women tend to feel their way through. I wonder if men have a grief language at all as we struggle with explanatory words for our feelings. I don’t think as men we always explain very well that we “need” to take up our sport or recreational activity again and maybe this sends the message that we don’t care or are running away from the reality of our circumstances and tension can build between partners.

Women can more readily express themselves as mentioned and their language is more fluent and open and it is about relationships and their interdependence where men seems to be more exact and about the facts, controlling the situation and being independent. It seems to be the old cliché; men grieve head to heart and women heart to head. Personal relationships can be seriously challenged at this time as the partners can hold confusing or opposites interpretations of how a physical life needs to be managed.

The truth is that men and women grieve differently and that needs to be clearly understood and accepted by all. As men, we are brought up not to show emotion and big boys don’t cry so we continue to pass that “crap” onto to our sons. Think about it? I ask you mums did you ever use or allow the magic spit and stifle the tears with a “be brave” comment? I know that I did. We wonder why men don’t readily cry? Most of us have been trained not to use tears as they are a sign of weakness and when we desperately need them, we frequently find them hard to access.

I have looked at the roles we play, the coping styles and language as a few of the issues that make our grief distinctly ours, male and different than the way a woman grieves. This do not mean that either party suffers more than the other but rather that we grieve in our own very special ways; with the same intensity, pain and the myriad of emotions that constitute our respective grief. Our grief can be made more difficulty by the ways that society applies rules to us as well as by the ways we add rules of expected behaviour to our burden of grief. I know from my own experience which included the finishing of a life and a marriage that I could have done things so much better and it was not intentional I just did not know how to resolve it that well.

**The reason for this brief “men’s message” is to reinforce our differences in how we express the same pain and to encourage you to understand the roles you play, develop a functional coping style, create a language that is understood and allows you both to say the same things but in a different methods and manners but be aware of each other’s needs. Men it is so very important to express your thoughts to your partner and women for you to understand the difference in how we grieve and accept the difference.**

**The great importance here is to realise that both genders are grieving!**

May I leave you with a few grief sayings that may fortify you when you are feeling a bit down and need another perspective.

**When you are sorrowful, look again in your heart, and you shall see that, in truth, you are weeping for that which has been your delight.” Kahlil Gibran**

**“Give sorrow words. The grief that does not speak whispers the o’er fraught heart, and bids it break” Shakespeare**

**“The road through grief is a rocky one. Travelling along it requires courage, patience, wisdom and hope” Candy Lightner**

**“Grief remains one of the few things that has the power to silence us. It is a whisper in the world and a clamour within” Anna Quindlen**

**“One cannot get through life without pain. What we can do is choose how we use the pain life presents us” Bernie Siegel**

**“Grief is not something that happens to you; it is something you do” Bob Wyborn**

**“Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding”  
Kahlil Gibran**

**“You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, “I have lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along” You must do the thing you think you cannot do.” Eleanor Roosevelt**

**“Don’t walk behind me, I may not lead. Don’t walk in front of me, I may not follow. Just walk beside me and be my friend.” Albert Camus**

**“Well has it been said that there is no grief like the grief which does not speak.”  
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow**

**“When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives mean the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing and face with us the reality of our *powerlessness*, that is a friend who cares.”  
Henri Nouwen**