'It's like being a member of a club I didn't want to join': Reflections on a support group for bereaved dads

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Abstract: We know very little about dads' experiences of grief, and still less about the efficacy and impact of groups specifically set up to support them. This article is one attempt to address these gaps in knowledge and understanding, through consideration of a dads' group at Helen & Douglas House hospice. Lengthy extracts from a facilitated group discussion in which members of the group reflect on its meaning and value are included. Context is also offered on the group itself, as are initial thoughts on significance and wider applicability. Through this article, we offer a different perspective on dads' grief and on groups for bereaved dads. The dads themselves powerfully articulate the extreme nature of their losses, explaining 'nothing can solve the problem.' On the other hand, they also stress that, within this context, the tiny improvements they feel and experience make coming to the group worthwhile and important.

Keywords: dads, fathers, groups, bereavement, grief, peer support, first-person experiences

Introduction and context: 'We're dads who've lost a child'

This article is a reflection, by those taking part and by those supporting them, on a group for bereaved dads at a hospice for children and young adults. The article mainly consists of extracts from a facilitated discussion in which the group reflects on its meaning and value, individually and collectively. The surrounding commentaries seek to explain the context of their conversation, as well as offering some initial thoughts on meaning. Through this article, we hope to offer a different perception on dads' grief and on groups for bereaved dads.

We use the word 'dads' rather than the more formal 'fathers' because this is the term most commonly used by members

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of the group to describe themselves – 'dad,' 'dads' and 'dads' group.' One could speculate that this more personal, warm and vulnerable term is preferred because it re-emphasises and honours the special bond with the child(ren) who has (have) died. 'Dads' better matches the informality and safety felt in the group, and also emphasises a sense of *now* as compared with 'father', suggestive of the past.

There is a small, but growing, body of work covering issues of fathers (the term more commonly used) and grief. Key themes of the wider literature include a need to hear and share fathers' stories of loss and grief, issues around *male* expectations and experiences of grief, and the (often limited) nature of support for bereaved fathers.

Within the context of a wider cultural shift emphasising the value of first person experiences and stories, accounts of male grief are published in the spirit of offering 'a better understanding of what it is like to walk in their shoes' (Corr, Torkildson & Horgan, 2013, p1; see also Teasdale, 2008; Farley, 2015 and the website www.grievingdads.com). Additionally, recent studies have sought to foreground experiences of male grief, rather than consider them simply in relation to female grief. Assumptions that men/fathers go through grieving processes faster and with less intensity than women/mothers have been questioned (Cordell & Thomas, 1990; Cook, 1988). McCreight (2004) argues that researchers have equated expression of feelings with depth of feelings; because male grief is often less visible it is assumed either not to be there or to be less intense. Authors again and again refer to the *lack* of research into particular groups, including fathers with children affected by cancer (Neil-Urban & Jones, 2002), or with life-limiting illnesses (Davies *et al*, 2004), or with disabilities (Wood & Milo, 2001).

Allied to the theme of fathers' grief being perhaps both different or overlooked, literature suggests that there may be value in running groups for 'dissonant males' (Doka & Martin, 2010, p197). There is very limited published work exploring such groups in practice, with the notable exceptions of Teasdale (2003), and Fisher & Brimble (2013). Groups may be one way to offer dads much-needed 'opportunity and resources to grieve' (Aho *et al*, 2006). Parallels can be drawn with studies exploring group work with fathers whose partners died (Yopp & Rosenstein, 2013), and parents dealing with grief (Grinyer, 2012). Indeed, research using focus groups to find out more about the experiences of grieving fathers, found that the groups themselves developed supportive functions (Neil-Urban & Jones, 2002, p102).

This article seeks to bring together these three key threads of telling the story, considering expectation and experience, and exploring what – if anything – might help.

The group: 'dads would talk if there were other dads'

The dads' group described here was established in 2011 at Helen & Douglas House in Oxford, in the wider context of a hospice-based team offering support for parents both before and following bereavement. Helen House was established in 1982, the world's first children's hospice. Douglas House opened in 2004 as one of the first for young adults (16-35). The dads' group supports dads from both hospices and beyond. As a pioneer in work with children with life-limiting conditions, Helen House has developed a particular focus on support for parents following the death of a child.

Initially, a series of three workshops was offered to bereaved parents; a group for dads, a group for mums, and a final session bringing both together. The idea to offer workshops split along male/female (or mum/dad) lines grew from observations of gendered patterns of communication in mixed groups. Broadly speaking, men spoke less than women, yet at times it was noted that 'dads would talk if there were other dads,' 'giving each other permission to just talk about it as it is, not how they felt they should.'[1] These observations suggested that a group exclusively for dads might offer bereaved dads a *different* kind of space which might be helpful to them in living with their loss. (As one of the facilitators is neither a bereaved dad nor male, the term 'exclusively' needs to be qualified. Whilst – as a result of not sharing the status of group members – her role within the group is at times less vocal, it is nonetheless invaluable, drawing as it does on many years' experience of working with bereaved parents.)

The observation that dads-only groups might be helpful are borne out in the wider literature (eg Rosenblatt, 2000), and by comments by the dads themselves about feeling inhibited in mixed groups. The first workshop (which explicitly adopted an informal approach, inviting dads not fathers) was well attended, and the dads themselves asked for a further session. From this second session emerged the idea that the group should become one which met regularly. This parallels experiences at St Christopher's Hospice. They set up a one-off workshop for fathers whose partners had died which became a continuing programme (Burnell & Goodchild, 1994).

The group meets five times a year, usually at Helen & Douglas House. The focus of each meeting is a group discussion of two hours, followed by lunch. The discussion begins by checking-in with the needs of each dad, before focusing on a topic agreed by the group beforehand. Topics have included anger, relationships, faith and non-faith, and surviving children.

The group is facilitated by a bereaved dad (with significant experience of group work) and a professional bereavement counsellor (who has worked with most of the original members of the group). Their different claims to personal authority and knowledge, based on personal understanding on the one hand and shared experience on the other, seem to create a particularly 'safe' environment for bereaved dads to talk. Their

1 Marie. Interview with group facilitators, 2 September 2014. Marie and Tim go on to describe moments when language and body language used shifted as two dads spoke together within a mixed group. By contrast, 'a shutter would come down' for some dads within wider discussions.

complementary roles ensure that the group remains informed by practice and experience, and that group processes and dynamics are carefully but lightly managed. Facilitators spend significant time together preparing and debriefing for each group, sharing their knowledge and reflections.

Group membership was originally drawn from those dads who took part in the initial workshop. Since then, membership has expanded, with bereaved dads whose children have died at Helen House or Douglas House routinely invited to join, whilst other dads beyond the hospice community hear of the group through networks of bereaved parents. Staff members talk about the group during 1:1 sessions and at Remembrance Days, with information also available on the Helen & Douglas House website. Support from the facilitators is offered to new members by phone or email or in person prior to attending; one dad commented, 'I couldn't come to the dads' group cold.'

There are currently nineteen dads on the mailing list, with an average attendance of nine. The group of dads is diverse in terms both of their wider life experiences, such as socio-economic background, age, and ethnicity, and in terms of their experiences as bereaved dads. Key factors and differences include the condition of their child(ren), the age of their child(ren) when they died, how long their child(ren) had been unwell, whether the death was sudden/traumatic/anticipated, and the time since their child(ren) died. In addition, whilst many of the dads are married (to the mother of the child(ren) who died), some are separated or divorced. Some, but not all, have surviving children.

As our project didn't encompass bereaved dads who chose not to come to the group, it is impossible for us to speculate whether the group dads themselves, or their experiences, are or aren't typical of bereaved dads in general. Future research needs to capture the experiences of dads who don't attend groups (as well as those that do). Regardless of background and education, and in a wide variety of ways, men in this group seem to be both more emotionally articulate *in this setting* than in mixed groups, *and* than stereotypes would suggest. The facilitators also note that, over time, and through listening to each other, and giving each other permission to feel and to talk, group members have individually and collectively developed their capacity to explore and express their feelings.

What follows are extracts from a facilitated group discussion which took place as part of an 'away day' for the dads' group in March 2014, with some commentary. Prior to the day, permission was sought from the group for someone outside the group to facilitate and record a conversation about the group. The discussion immediately followed their more usual session. All chose to stay for the discussion, though one dad chose to stay with the group, but not to speak. Written consent was sought from dads individually. The group were asked what the group means to them, and, if it works for them, whether they had any ideas as to why that might be. The dads shared further thoughts about the group over lunch and a walk. Individual interviews were conducted with dads unable to attend the away day.

All dads were offered the option of having their real name used or speaking anonymously (and having a pseudonym chosen for them.) Two dads preferred to have a pseudonym used, the remainder their own name. As one of the issues emphasised by the group was ownership of experience, emotion and story, it seemed particularly important to respect their choices. Ethically, this seemed more important than consistency of names and naming. This approach is also informed by the work of Grinyer (2002a; 2002b) who, based on her work with bereaved parents, challenges assumptions that ethical research always means anonymity for participants.

The extracts from the group discussion are presented at length and as fully as possible, with only limited editing (to preserve the anonymity of dads where requested, or that of others), for a number of key reasons. Firstly, to respect and emphasise the authority of the dads on their own experiences. They best know and articulate their individual experiences of grief and their collective experiences of being in the group. Secondly, to share in an in-depth way male perspectives on grief and on grief support, as these are often either absent in the wider literature, or presented simply in relation to female grief (Cook, 1998; Riches & Dawson, 2000). Thirdly, longer extracts are valuable in that they replicate and represent some of the patterns of communication so valued by the dads within the group itself. The use of humour, a balance of affirmation and gentle challenge, turn-taking, and repetition of points or phrases are particularly notable.

Commentary on the discussion is offered in the form of text boxes, highlighting jewels and gems from our 'rich seam of material' (as one dad described the conversation at its close). Our comments offer only one perspective; we hope that others will gain valuable and different insights through reading the fuller extracts.

The discussion: 'a rich seam of material'

Kerry: So. I wanted to start just by asking what this group means to you? If it works for you, whether you had any ideas how or why that might be?

…

Ian: It works for me.

Kerry: Okay. A great start.

Ian: … It works for me because I'm sitting talking to, what I would consider a group of friends now. I've known some, even though some I've only met for the first time, but we've – we've all been through the same experience and so … you know. The other guys can – if I say something, they can understand it to a certain extent, because they've *been* through that same experience. I've always said, rightly or wrongly, if you haven't lost a child yourself you can't understand what I'm going through (*nods in room*)… And so there's the comfort of knowing that *everybody* sat listening to me bumbling on about stuff has been through a similar, not necessarily the same, but a similar experience. And obviously our children have all been at varying different ages when we've lost them but at the end of the day the one thing we've all got in common is that we're dads who've lost a child.

And that's, you know, why it works for me. I don't feel that I could talk in the depth that I sometimes do comfortably with a *different* group of people that haven't experienced this.

These comments echo the 'select fraternity' described in Wood and Milo's (2001, p648) study of bereaved fathers. The dads here emphasise their shared experiences as being different/special/unique, as are the depths to which they can talk, very quickly and without obvious effort, about experiences and feelings within this group. The phrase 'the club no-one wants to join' (see below) has become almost a mantra for the group, repeated in slightly different forms in this discussion, individual interviews and other group sessions. The phrase is also one 'owned' by a different group of bereaved dads: www.tuesdayswiththedads.org.

Jason: I also think, what are the expectations of the group? I mean, when you say it works – nothing's going to make it better. But you've talked about it, we've talked about it, you know, you carry this kind of sadness around with you and you feel it more on the days when you come to the group, but when you leave you feel – all the pressure hasn't gone, all the sadness hasn't gone, but it just feels a *little* bit calmer and you feel like you're coping with it a *little* bit better. But, it doesn't *solve* the problem, because that's … unless you have a time machine you can't solve the problem. Don't have one of those, do you?

Kerry: Not so much, no.

The theme of bringing your children back recurs, as does the sense of time being an often unreliable indicator of grief experiences. Such comments chime with theories which emphasise 'continuing bonds' with the deceased (Klass, Silverman & Nickman, 1996). There is a sense that dads, rather than being held back by the group, are enabled to live day by day, whatever that means for them. The group is presented as respite from the work of living without their child(ren).

Neil: For me, it's like being a member of a club that I didn't really particularly want to join. *(smiles, nods in room*) Like Jason, I feel apprehensive on the way here. It's very difficult. But I come away from it feeling that, you know, a feeling of support, because I'm sharing quite intimate details with a load of the guys like I don't share with other friends or even members of my family. It's a chance to be yourself sometimes, just be yourself. Let it hang out.

Ian: Don't do that! (*laughter*)

Neil: And in so many ways, you know … and that's why I get that feeling of relief when I leave. Like you were saying, I'm feeling apprehensive on my way here, as I get nearer, and the creeping storytelling as we go round the room, trying to work out what am I going to say this time. And my expectations of this group are just to get that feeling of support, to be able to tell people all sorts of stuff you wouldn't be able to tell anywhere else, to anybody else. Not even partners or close friends.

Pete: I think from my perspective, I may go for a drink with my mates, but I talk about the footie. And I think we've probably all done it, gone 'I'm bored of your conversation. I want to talk about my daughter.' And I can see it, as soon as you bring it up, the eyes glaze and they change the subject quite quickly. So … coming here for me, ten, eleven years in from the death of my daughters, it's an opportunity probably to be a little bit selfish, in reality. To be a bit self-indulgent, to visit those feelings, to – yes, to hear and, you know, and support each other. And probably primarily, just to bring them back to life, in a way. By talking about them, you know, brings them back to life. I can picture them when I'm talking about them. But – like I said today – I can't remember the last time somebody asked me about my kids. So, and – even my wife, we don't – we struggle just to make the house work, you know, and to look after our two surviving children. And so to come here and just *be*, I suppose, without the pressures of work and. I don't make these sessions very often because work doesn't allow me and it's precious.

Neil: And it's *not* judgemental. It's not competitive (*In the room: Yeah*, *yeah*), like you sometimes get with men. And it's just a feeling of ease and in some senses the reassurance that it's – you're going to be listened to without being critiqued, basically.

Ben: I think as well, I mean obviously this is the first time I've come but my experience of things like this is – I mean I'm the only person I know that's had a child who's died. None of my other friends can relate to that. And so I *process* my emotions and I think, to a certain extent, am I the only person thinking this? And I've got a lot of support, loads of great support from my family and friends, but as you say, nobody who hasn't been through this can really understand it. And just sat here in the last hour I've heard so many comments that I've thought 'that is exactly what I think, that is exactly what's going on in my head.' So it's quite nice to … and I'm there on my own thinking, I'm sort of processing my emotions, but actually there's a whole load of people who are processing it in exactly the same way. I'm not alone. And, yeah, we're experiencing different things and we're at different stages and we all process things in different ways, but it's quite nice to have a kind of touchstone, and people to say, 'yes, that's it, I couldn't have – those are the words I would have used myself to describe that exactly.' And that's nice. It's a reaching out and touching people who – who will know exactly what you mean and who can articulate things better than you do.

Jason: Yeah, it's almost – I don't know if this is the right language – it's almost reassuring to know that other people are suffering as much (*laughter*) and that you're not going mad, right? And people ten years in – when I started coming to the group it was probably six months, a year, after Esme died – and there were people ten years in and I thought, they *must* be over it, you've got to be. But you don't and that's – reassuring is probably the wrong word. But it's a common thing you share, isn't it? (*nods around the room*)

Richard: I think – more of an observational point – it could be – I'm not sure I'm going to make a lot of sense here. I'm echoing almost everything I've heard so far, but from a snapshot perspective, that a group like this might have a lifetime, or a

season. And it might exist for a short time. I guess there's a danger when you started that you might have had a group of dads who were all in the same situation, we've discussed and aired a number of topics and it could have come to a natural conclusion. But I think there is a culture in society that men don't show their emotions and don't go deep and don't share and don't discuss. And I think that … a group like this can be naturally supportive, and to some extent have a *rolling* life of newcomers and old timers and people come to it with all sorts of different things, but the newcomers can see, and share experiences, and the others that are there can be encouraging and supportive and empathetic to those points. And you probably can see it being almost a continuum and – as you've just described – you can come and be sharing *your* experiences about your daughters, but also to be supportive in a framework that doesn't exist anywhere else. So … I think there's community benefit to the group which I think is important to share. It's just, I mean everybody's said something along those lines anyway, but I'm just feeding that back.

Tim: One of the things that's most important to *me* is that I knew when Naomi was diagnosed that my reactions to the rest of her life were different to her mum's. And we'd disagree … and that's healthy and unhealthy. But actually since she's died I feel very different and it's been a very difficult area to actually share how I am and how she is in terms of the loss of our daughter. And I don't want to make it sound too simple – men grieve differently, of course they do, but actually I can't talk about that with *her*, my partner. Because that's – that *is* the difference. But actually how I share how I feel with this group is in many ways very much more natural, simply because of the way I lived my life with my daughter when she was alive and then when she died.

This extract is an example of Tim bringing his experiences as a bereaved dad into the room. In sharing his own experiences, and his reflections on those experiences, he is giving permission and space for other dads to do the same. His dual role as participant dad and facilitator seems central – Paul at one point refers to the power of the group as 'trickery' on Tim's part, elsewhere more prosaically that 'he makes the group work.'

Paul interview, May 2014

Neil: I think that comes back to the non-judgemental thing. I think that I've talked to you guys about some of the things I don't talk to my wife about because I fear stepping on a bloody landmine. Saying the wrong thing. Because we do feel differently in our grief it's very difficult, and I'm very conscious that I might get something badly wrong. I might say something. And my feeling is that I can come here and say things and not feel – be judged for it. …

Jason: Yeah, I think over the times I've been, I think you've seen – I've been there myself – you've seen people in some very raw states. And very open that you can't perhaps deal with your wife or can't deal with your mates down the pub and sometimes you need to do it. I've sat here myself and cried my eyes out. (*Yeah*) …

Pete: I think that reality, we touched on it very early on, we've had independent counselling. My wife was having her counselling and I was having my counselling, and we just assumed, I guess – we cared for the girls so closely through their lives, that we just assumed we'd walk the same pathway afterwards and, well, we haven't. It has been very different. And that nearly broke us, in reality. So … I think CBUK (Child Bereavement UK) was kind of one of the first places where we were actually talking *together*, sitting in the same room with and actually finding some commonality. But I still value this group where it's a bunch of guys just being brutally honest with each other, really. In a safe environment. We can cry, we can laugh. Hey, where else would I be able to break down in tears without feeling like a complete prat, you know?

Neil: Or say an inappropriate joke at the wrong moment as well?

Pete: Oh, I do that as well. (*laughter*)

Neil: The kind of gallows humour is quite refreshing, actually. (*laughter*)

Here, as elsewhere, discussion about the group replicates patterns of communication within the group, which seem crucial to the group's identity and functioning. The use of 'gallows humour,' a sometimes looser form of language, alongside clear expressions of compassion and empathy are apparent. Turn taking and listening, and intensity of feeling, are also key characteristics of the group. Dads repeatedly refer to the group's 'camaraderie.'

eg Bern interview Sept 2014

Alistair: Most people outside that club wouldn't crack that sort of a joke. But I think – I've only been here once before and that was about six months ago… And actually I don't think my wife and I are *that* different in our grief. We certainly don't – I don't think she or I fear saying something in case we upset the other, even though we obviously do. But I think what's good about coming here only periodically, because it wouldn't work every day – is that at home you're talking about it on and off quite a lot of the time. So I suppose you lose some of the intensity of the conversation which can be a good thing. A *boost* of emotion can be good, which is something you don't get if you're exposed to it, if you're going through it the whole time. It's almost the sort of … I can't think of the word … the word escapes me, but – fatigue, it's kind of an emotion fatigue when you're exposed to the same person, whereas if you come here … I think you get the point. And that's helpful. And the time I came last, which was August, there were only five of us in the room – and it was hearing these people's stories for the first time. And all of these stories were incredibly sad, especially your (*gestures*) story which tipped me over the edge and brought out huge torrents of tears and it was good in that I was crying for you, not for myself even and obviously … there was a crossover, even though our stories are very different. And you need that – 'cos, as I was saying, you don't want to force the tears, and I haven't really cried for my son

for seven months now, actually. And at the time in August, I think I hadn't cried for a while before. I've got some quite sensitive friends, I move in quite sensitive circles, certainly in my circles, the idea about men not showing their feelings is – for me – it feels a *little* bit exaggerated though there is of course some truth in it. But still you can't talk about it in the depth that we have here.

The discussion continues, with the dads again emphasising the value of hearing other people's stories, and also being able to offer your own version of your story without fear of causing hurt or contradiction (where your version differs from that of your partner). The dads spoke of their stories being so difficult that professional counsellors find it hard to hear them, and also of being in the group enabling them to feel just a quarter percent better. We pick up the conversation again with Tim.

Tim: I think there's also something about – for me – my story's awful. I mean it shouldn't happen – so many things in it that just shouldn't be. Anger – is something that we've talked about in this group is how we manage the anger. But one thing that's been a real leveller for me is actually hearing other people's stories. And there's *never* been a boring moment for me in other people's stories. Because it puts my experience into perspective. It's awful for me, but I can *absolutely* hear how *tragic* the stories of other people are. So it really doesn't just make me feel like I'm in it with others, but also it makes me feel that I'm okay in a weird sort of way.

The value of listening as well as talking, of being on receive as much as transmit, is presented here as valuable and therapeutic. Hearing the stories of others contributes to a normalisation of both experiences and feelings. Elsewhere the value of offering as well as receiving support through the sharing of stories and experiences is emphasised for bereaved men in general (Doka & Martin, 2010; Yopp & Rosenstein, 2013), and bereaved fathers (Neil-Urban & Jones, 2002) in particular.

Andy: I'd agree with that as well. It sort of organises your own experiences, just sort of checking in with everybody really. Talking, I kind of feel like that.

Ben: I think, as well, however good your counsellor is – my wife and I have a counsellor and that's really effective, but even so because there are so few people – even if you're there with your best, more supportive, most understanding mate … if you're talking to them you're likely to be on transmit, whereas here for the last hour and a half I've been on receive just as much as I've been on transmit. And, let's face it, communication is just as much about listening as talking and I've found that just as useful as me sitting and talking at someone for an hour about how I feel – a) they wouldn't be able to have that same level of empathy – however good a counsellor they are they haven't been through it but, b) listening is just as effective a way for me personally as a way of processing what's going on as just to talk.

Kerry: And I think that touches on some of the things other people have said about it being so unusual to find people in your similar situations and also having that slight distance in that it's not their story as well, they are not going to have different versions and they are not likely perhaps to be hurt by an alternative version.

Jason: Yeah, chances are we wouldn't know each other unless …

Ian: You don't walk down the street and immediately know. It's like if I've had a leg off, it's like 'oh, you know, they've had a leg off.' You haven't got this – (*gestures*) 'I'm a bereaved dad' – on your forehead, have you?

Jason: Sometimes you have this expression though, with something going through your mind. If I'm on the tube and I grimace, everyone thinks you're a bit weird … It's true, actually! (*laughter*)

Pete: It's interesting what you're saying, though. A bereaved parent doesn't have a label, do they? You have a widow or, but a bereaved dad – there is no label. We're just lost, aren't we? (*smiles*) …

It seems clear that, at this point as well as others in the discussion, the dads are offering and sharing a significant level of reflective insight. The level of intimacy and reflection is commented on by the dads, and confirms the findings of others that men 'both grieve and reflected on their grief,' rather than – as some might expect – rationalising either (McCrieght, 2004, p346).

David: I would say though, when I'm going around doing my living in the world, in many ways I'm like before. But just things aren't going to be right any more, but I think you can't expect happiness, as it were. But you don't realise … children, things you did when they were born, you appreciate them. But now you can't …

Pete: It's sad, all our lives have taken – we had our journey mapped out or probably at least what we'd hoped to be mapped out. For any of us – what will I be in the year 2000? I didn't think bereaved dad would be … Your journey has gone off and you can never get back to that road that you were travelling on. You are on a different tangent and you have to accept the lot that comes with that …

We leave the discussion at this point. The dads went on to share their sense of commitment to and comfort from the group, to articulate a sense of adapting but not getting over their losses, and to emphasise the tiny but noticeable and important 'take aways' of the group for them as they live with their losses.

Conclusions: 'like being a member of a club that I didn't really particularly want to join'

This conversation between bereaved dads, and our commentary on it, is simply a snapshot of one moment in the life of this group. The group has an ongoing life, with an ebb and flow of members which in itself is both significant and valuable. At the core is an ability to absorb new dads with different needs and

experiences. As with most groups, this is a self-selected one; their voices and experiences can only represent themselves, rather than grieving dads more widely. Nevertheless, we feel that the above discussion offers much in re-considering support for grieving dads in other contexts.

Our work with the dads confirms the findings of others that bereaved fathers 'benefit greatly from support and outlets for emotional expression' (Cordell & Thomas, 1990, p79). The work of Cook (1988) has been hugely helpful in emphasising that both experiences and understanding of fathers' bereavement are often shaped by assumptions that mothers are 'the norm', with fathers considered by comparison rather than in their own right. Within this framework, men's experiences will always be understood in as in some sense deficient. By foregrounding the men's own (collective) story of their group, we wish to present it as valuable in itself, not in relation to a model of coping/not coping.

Through this article, we aim to contribute to the small but growing body of literature on dads' grief. The dads present themselves as being and feeling somehow separate and different in their experiences of grief – different from their wives or partners, different from their friends, different from others walking down the street. They describe their very unwanted, unexpected, unsettling identity as a bereaved dad. By contrast, in the room with other dads, there is a heightened sense of commonality, of camaraderie. For many, the group's longevity remains a rare sanctuary to connect with their child as, outside, no one else shares their experience. The dads emphasise the importance of continuing and complex bonds with their child(ren), as well as their shifting experiences of time. The group is in part shaped by the presence of a bereaved dad as facilitator, giving permission to others to share through expressions of his own experiences, and reinforcing the wider point that no-one helps bereaved parents like bereaved parents. The group itself has developed its own uniquely supportive patterns of communication. In particular, the function of listening as well as talking seems vital to these men. This in turn, establishes a sense of intimacy and trust, enabling dads to 'go deep.' This group of dads illustrate both their capacity and need to talk intensely about experiences and emotions. Their experiences suggest that those working with bereaved dads need to be mindful of their needs, and to proactively, publicly and imaginatively explore ways to meet them.

A twin emphasis emerges from the group. The dads outline the traumatic nature of their losses, and their expectation that, without a time machine, nothing can 'solve the problem.' Their views chime with those of Davies, *et al* (2004, p132) who emphasise that, given their situations, 'preventing or alleviating fathers' suffering may not be an achievable, or a realistic goal.' Yet at the same time the dads highlight the unique value, to them, of the dads' group in enabling them to feel 'a quarter percent better' both on the day and in their lives beyond. For them, this more than meets their needs and expectations. It is perhaps this message, rather than a model for dads' groups perfectly replicable in other situations, which might be most useful to those working with bereaved dads in both practice and research. ■

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