

# **“Men grieve differently” – the importance of providing grief counseling to men who have lost children**

Case Study July, 2024



## Summary

The loss of a child is a painful and traumatic experience. Both mothers and fathers of deceased children go through grieving processes but usually, they do this differently. Studies have shown that men are socialized to refrain from exhibiting grief related emotions thus it is easy to miss the adverse effects of loss and grief that they experience.

Since inception, CHAMPS program has actively provided grief counseling to mostly bereaved mothers who have lost their children. Over time, we have observed that the fathers of the deceased children also require grief support to reduce detrimental outcomes for the fathers including prolonged grief, suicides, and general poor health.

“*Social expectations dictate that men must be strong because “**tigers don’t cry;**” many men believe that showing emotion will expose them as weak if they display their emotions like women.*”

# Background and Context

CHAMPS Programme has been conducting multi-site research to understand the causes of death of children in low-income countries – South Africa, Mozambique, Kenya, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Mali, Sierra Leone, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. Knowing the cause of death is commendable because such data can be used to change the trajectory of disease patterns and reduce the death of children. One of the negative outcomes of the death of children is the profound grief that the parents feel which tends to lead to other psycho-social challenges. CHAMPS program designed a grief counselling intervention to mitigate the effect of the death of children on the parents.

As is usually the case in most instances, this service has been used more by mothers than fathers. There are many reasons why this is the case; first, most men find it difficult to reach out and seek help when they are experiencing immense grief. Studies have shown that men usually struggle to express their grief and other related emotions as they are socialized to hide their pain. Despite well-documented data regarding bereavement, grief, and mourning, there is less attention paid to the impact of bereavement on men and how they process their pain (Brabant et al., 1992).

Men are expected to protect their families, especially their children, and when a child dies, most men are encouraged to suppress their feelings of grief to show that they are strong (McNeil et al., 2021; Postavaru et al., 2023). Culturally, women are considered vulnerable human beings especially when it comes to expressing their emotions. That is why when there is a death in the family, people will normally gravitate towards and focus on women as they offer condolences. Given these social expectations, women are expected/allowed to show their emotions in public.

At the same time, it is difficult for men to do the same. Social expectations dictate that men must be strong because "tigers don't cry;" many men believe that showing emotion will expose them as weak if they display their emotions like women. Providing grief support like connecting parents to programs or services that assist in healing effectively creates closure (McNeil et al., 2022; Postavaru et al., 2023).

01

## Masculinity and children

The loss of a child is considered an antithesis of fatherhood and masculinity. A man who loses a child in infancy can lead to extreme grief in a man because he will feel that he has been robbed of an opportunity to be a father (parental status) and practice fatherhood (i.e. parenting behaviour and identity) (Pleck, 2010:27). The researcher heard from a man whose child had died, that on seeing the body of his deceased son he exclaimed, "My boy, why are you are you doing this to me"? An experience like this can affect a father's sense of maleness (ibid). As a consequence, men will grieve internally and usually alone. This was observed among the fathers of the deceased children who participated in CHAMPS. Many remained silent and tried to cope with the grief alone. There was no closure nor acceptance of the loss while they were, as one participant noted "... dying alone inside..."

02

## Fathering and fatherhood

The loss of a child is difficult for any father but slightly different for a step-father, who despite not being a biological father (a social status), is called "social father" to the child (Pleck, 2010:29). One step-father in the CHAMPS study explained that he felt extreme loss after his child died. He said, "... my heart was broken ...seeing the child that I had taken in and raised as my own had died... just like that...". On the other hand, the biological father experienced a different kind of grief as it was coupled with guilt for not being there for the child. The step-father was grieving the loss of being a father (social status) and the latter was grieving the loss of fatherhood (parental status, parenting behaviour, and identity). Both men were affected by the loss but they grieved differently.

03

## Masculinity and fatherhood

A father provides for his children including health care needs and this role is challenged when a child dies due to the unavailability of the father's care leading to the death of a child. The grief experienced by the father can be painful. A case was recorded whereby a father was out of the country when the child fell ill and died. This case revealed some complex socio-cultural issues that the man had to navigate because he was not officially married to the mother of the child. His fatherhood (biological and social senses) was challenged here as he was not there for his child. His masculinity was also questioned as he had not been able to perform the social role to follow his traditions and perform the marriage rights before the child was born. As such his family did not allow him to quickly be with his partner when she was mourning and burying the child. This man was reported to be struggling to cope and sought counseling. He said, ***"The pain I experienced was worse than the death itself, and I was so vulnerable that not even a single member of the family was on my side. On the other side, my partner was also blaming me for everything she experienced with my family when I was not around"***.

“

*The pain I experienced was worse than the death itself, and I was so vulnerable that not even a single member of the family was on my side. On the other side, my partner was also blaming me for everything she experienced with my family when I was not around”.*



“

*You cannot prevent the birds of sorrow from flying over your head, but you can prevent them from building nests in your hair.”*

— Old Chinese proverb



# Impact of interventions

There is a need to consider tailor-made counseling interventions for men as they have complicated grief responses and usually suffer alone. Counseling can have a positive impact on grieving men when provided in a timely manner to men who have lost their children. CHAMPS Programme is doing has facilitated such grief counselling services for fathers resulting in better health for themselves and for their families.

## Affiliations

1. South African Medical Research Council Vaccines and Infectious Diseases Analytics Research Unit, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.
2. Child Health and Mortality Prevention Surveillance (CHAMPS) Program Office, Emory Global Health Institute, Emory University, Atlanta, GA, USA
3. Department of Paediatrics and Child Health, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg
4. Faculty of Health Sciences, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.

## References

1. Brabant S, Forsyth CJ, Melancon C. Grieving men: thoughts, feelings, and behaviors following deaths of wives. *Hosp J*. 1992;8(4):33-47. doi: 10.1080/0742-969x.1992.11882741. PMID: 1302746.
2. McNeil, M. J., Baker, J. N., Snyder, I., Rosenberg, A. R., & Kaye, E. C. (2021, April 1). Grief and Bereavement in Fathers After the Death of a Child: A Systematic Review. *Pediatrics*, 147(4). <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2020-040386>
3. Gianina-Ioana Postavaru, Jenny Hamilton, Sian Davies, Helen Swaby, Anastasia Michael, Rabbi Swaby, Elizabeta B. Mukaetova-Ladinska; The FATHER Model of Loss and Grief After Child's Life-Limiting Illness. *Pediatrics* July 2023; 152 (1): e2022059122. 10.1542/peds.2022-059122
4. McNeil, M. J., Kiefer, A., Woods, C., Barnett, B., Berry, Carter, K., Clark, L., Mandrell, B. N., Snaman, J., Kaye, E. C., & Baker, J. N. (2022, April). "You are not alone": Connecting through a bereaved parent mentor program for parents whose child died of cancer. *Cancer Medicine*, 11(17), 3332–3341. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cam4.4696>
5. Postavaru, G. I., Hamilton, J., Davies, S., Swaby, H., Michael, A., Swaby, R., & Mukaetova-Ladinska, E. B. (2023, June 14). The FATHER Model of Loss and Grief After Child's Life-Limiting Illness. *Pediatrics*, 152(1). <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2022-059122>
6. Pleck, J. H. (2010). Fatherhood and masculinity. In M. E. Lamb (Ed.), *The role of the father in child development* (5th ed., pp.

## Authors

Nellie Myburgh  
Duduzile Ziqubu  
Portia C. Mutevedzi  
Ziyaad Dangor  
Shabir Madhi

## Acknowledgments

Opportunity to acknowledge (appreciate) scientific colleagues who supported this work's success, and do not meet authorship criteria.



Child Health and Mortality  
Prevention Surveillance (CHAMPS)



CHAMPS Health



@CHAMPS\_Health



@CHAMPSHealth

## Child Heath And Mortality Prevention Surveillance

The CHAMPS network uses innovative approaches to generate and share knowledge that improves understanding and prevention of child mortality.



EMORY  
UNIVERSITY

Emory Global  
Health Institute