

PONDERINGS ALONG THE PATH

By Nadine Boyd

Dear Compassionate Friends:

This month we celebrate the gift of fathers and I would like to celebrate the gift of all the special men in our lives-fathers, stepfathers, foster and adoptive fathers, uncles, brothers, sons and friends. I think sometimes that men are not given enough credit for the roles they play as providers, caretakers and mentors. I am glad to see that in the last few decades men have been encouraged to take a more active role in their children's care and nurturing. Traditionally providing for your children's physical and emotional needs was seen as the mother's role; and unfortunately, the discipline was usually left up to the dad. Dads were not really encouraged to hug and praise their children, especially their sons. Boys were taught to be strong and not show emotions. Boys were told "big boys don't cry", "man up", "put up or shut up", "take it like a man" and "take care of your business". The strong silent type of man was held up as an example to achieve.

I believe this led to many men feeling they are not encouraged to show sadness, pain or grief. I heard a comment once from a man going through a rough emotional time that he felt "counseling is for weak people". My thought upon hearing this was "so only weak people have problems?" We know that it takes a strong person to reach out and admit you need help, but it is so rewarding to know there is help and you don't have to go through this alone. You don't have to feel helpless and isolated in your pain. This pain and grief often manifests itself as anger in men-a more "socially acceptable" role for men. A few years ago a wonderful family therapist (also a bereaved foster mom) gave me an incredible insight. She said often a mad child is a sad child, but because they feel they cannot express their sadness it comes out as behavior issues (thank you, Lee Oldenburg!) I'm sure this also happens with adults who are not encouraged to express their pain. I know in my work I often run across people who have been medicating their grief and pain with alcohol, drugs or reckless behavior. They often don't realize it until they get into counseling or therapy.

I know men who feel there is not a lot of support for grieving men. Often well-meaning people encountering grieving men will ask "how's your wife doing?"-not "how are YOU doing?" It's so interesting to me to see how men interact and communicate. Good friends or family will greet each other with the "one armed hug" and slap on the back. That one gesture says so much-"I'm so glad to see you. How are you doing? I've missed you and can't wait to hang out with you." My experience has been that men don't usually talk about their feelings when they get together. They will talk about a sports event, fishing, traveling they would like to do or past memories they share of sports events, fishing, traveling, etc. The **unspoken** conversation is "I'm here because I know you are hurting, and I care about you. I can't change your pain, but I hope I can make you feel better by sharing memories of happier times."

Because men and women often deal with their grief in different ways and are often at different levels in their grief, be gentle with each other. Realize that your spouse loved your child just as much as you do, but maybe feels he can't share those feelings. He feels he has to "be strong" for you and cannot break down emotionally and let out that pain. Be a "safe place" for your spouse to express each other's feelings. Respect each other's needs and reach out to each other, physically and emotionally. Realize that you both are going to have good and bad days on occasion; and usually not at the same time. Remember you have to literally take one day at a time to go through this journey of grief to healing.

There are no good or bad feelings-you feel what you feel. Perhaps a support group is not for you-you don't feel comfortable sharing with others face to face, but there are other options for Compassionate Friends. There are "Phone Friends" you can call to speak with who are listed in the newsletter. There are a number of chat rooms on the internet or the Compassionate Friends website. Sometimes you just need a good Friend to just listen, give you a hug and help you cry, or just help you breathe. Don't be ashamed to reach out. This is too big for us to deal with alone. If none of these options work for you find a good counselor or therapist, your minister or priest or physician. They can help you sort through your feelings without judging you, and find what works to help you heal.

I wish you a "safe place" that respects your feelings and gives you strength; a safe place that gives you comfort and healing.

In friendship,

Nadine