

“It's different for me and my spouse”: Gender differences in palliation and bereavement experiences of parents whose children died of cancer



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INTRODUCTION

- The death of a child can be a devastating experience for parents.
- Parental bereavement has been found to elicit more intense and chronic grief reactions than any other forms of bereavement (Sanders, 1989).
- Chronic grief has been associated with many psychological (i.e., depression, anxiety) and somatic symptoms (i.e., loss of appetite, sleep disturbances, fatigue) (Znoj & Keller, 2002; Wing et al., 2001).
- Gender has been documented to be an important factor in differentially shaping the bereavement experiences of parents. However, to date, no study has effectively captured gender differences and the rich stability and growth in the bereavement experiences of parents longitudinally.
- Better understanding of parental grieving process could guide the provision of appropriate support to help parents cope with their experiences during palliation and bereavement

OBJECTIVE

- To examine in-depth gender differences in palliation and bereavement experiences of parents whose children died of cancer using qualitative methodology

METHODS

Participants

	6mth	12mth	18mth	Age M(SD)
Mother	18	16	13	40.8(7.3)
Father	13	10	6	46.6(8.2)

Procedure

- Semi-structured interviews analyzed using Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990)
- Participants were interviewed in their homes. 2 interviews were conducted over telephone
- Only interviews from Time 1 and 3 analyzed to better capture longitudinal patterns

Analysis

- Analysis conducted by computer software (N-Vivo)
- Interviews read line by line and key words highlighted; Keywords developed into code phrases; Similar code phrases reduced to clusters; Clusters reduced to concepts; constant comparison for similarities and relationships, concept became core categories or themes
- Constant peer-rater comparison until agreement reached

FINDINGS

There were 5 areas in which longitudinal gender differences in parental bereavement were found:

- 1) **Employment:** Before the child fell ill, most families were dual-income families. Most fathers worked throughout their child's illness and returned to work shortly after the child's death, but reported loss of motivation. Mothers reduced or stopped employment to care for the ill child and had difficulties returning to work after the child's death.

I had actually been hired on at [name] Bank, and I was supposed to start four days before, four days after [child] was diagnosed. And then [child] got sick and I just couldn't start, I would start later, and then when the time came, I said I'm not ready, I can't leave her [Mother of a 2 year old daughter]

...I spent a lot more time at work. So I'd run away to work and [wife] has to, deal with home [Father of a 2 month old son]

- 2) **Grief reactions:** Throughout the 2 interviews, mothers expressed more intense and prolonged grief reactions compared to fathers

I sense in our grief, [wife] and I were quite different. I know that she was going through a lot at this point... I know that there are many times when she would just be in her grief by herself, and she found it helpful for her, she found it very helpful to be able to cry for several hours, very tiring, but she found that very therapeutic. I wrote some poetry, I found that helpful after a few months, I wrote something...[wife] and I, the way that we relate, I think it is still a bit stilted just because she is grieving in her way and I can't really break through that. Just by definition, so that's a bit, our relationship I think in this year is a bit strained... [Father of a 17 year old son]

... I mean he's seen his dad cry. Even though he tries not to. I think it's good. He sees his male role model cry. I think for men they work so hard at suppressing their feelings. Women are different, I mean my girlfriends we talk about it a lot. Men are just not that way. I think it's harder for them. [Mother of a 17 year old son]

- 3) **Coping:** Throughout the 2 interviews, mothers reported more child-focused activities; fathers reported more self-focused activities

It doesn't matter how much stuff I have. Because at first I kept thinking I have so little. I have so few pictures. I mean how many kids do as much press as her? I've got all these professional shots and still I don't have enough [Mother of a 6 year old daughter]

I know that my inclination is to react to things by getting depressed and withdrawing into myself and not dealing with, the grief is not random, I find it very hard in certain social circumstances, but generally things like that, personally, I find it sometimes difficult in large social groups and it became much more difficult after that, to deal with a room full of strangers...I mean I still do that, part of my job is that kind of thing, so I do it but it became much more difficult, but I think [wife's] inclination is not like that, and has very little sympathy for depressed people (laughs), so that is good for me... [Father of a 9 year old daughter]

- 4) **Relationship with surviving children:** Mothers were more involved with their surviving children than fathers after their child with cancer died. Although mothers spent less time with siblings while the ill child was alive, after the death, they turned their caring to their surviving children.

I brought [deceased child] everything. [Deceased child] got spoiled Anything I saw that I thought was even remotely something she would be interested in, I'd get. And I never did that with [surviving child]. And so I've started to realize this...I've got to give [surviving child] some of these special things. Like I've just never thought of her. [Mother of a 6 year old daughter]

[Surviving child is] in kindergarten now, and he has events and things to go to and birthday parties and soccer is coming up. So his life is sort of shaping what I do. I probably get out a little more... [surviving child] being in school is a great thing and a difficult thing because [I was] estranged from all the school and child activities because [deceased child] was sick. So we were removed and then [surviving child] wasn't school aged yet... So it's really great to be back into kind of a child's life and have all the events and activities going on and that helps but there are times in that where... you see through [surviving child] all the things that [deceased child] did and... So it's great and it's really hard. They just had their spring concert. Of course we missed [deceased child's]. Never got to see him do it...I never realized that until...[surviving child] just had his. And I felt so bad...I can't remember certain events. And uh, something will happen and it will trigger my memory like [surviving child's] Spring concert. [Mother of a 17 year old son]

- 5) **Communication with family:** Throughout the 2 interviews, mothers expressed more frequently than fathers wanting to share their bereavement experiences with their spouse. They also expressed wanting more communication with other family members and kept in touch with them more than fathers.

I want to talk about it constantly and he doesn't want to talk about it at all. I shouldn't say he doesn't want to talk about her, but it's not that he won't listen to me. But he doesn't want to listen as much as I want to talk about her. So, I'd say if I could, if I could tone it down to fifty percent, we'd probably be getting along much better [but] I have the need. And he's the only one I'm safe with. He's the only one who really knows what I'm talking about, you know, as far as the intimate details. And...I can't take it out on her [surviving child], you know, she's too young, it's not fair, you know. And also it's the favoritism thing, there's so many issues that go with that. He's my safest person. [Mother of a 6 year old daughter]

With [deceased child] being such a special sick child, everybody came around and got involved, and would call and would send gifts for her, and would visit when we were in hospital; and we're not the family with the sick kid anymore...It's almost like we got respect for it [then]. And now we don't get respect from family, because she's gone. [Mother of a 6 year old daughter]

CONCLUSION

- Findings illustrate unique gender differences in parental care during palliation and bereavement that adhere to stereotypic gender practices in terms of employment, expression of grief, coping, parenting and communication
- Tailoring support services differentially before and after the child dies, depending on parental gender, would be beneficial for bereaved parents



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