

Big Boys Don't Cry

The Secret Life of Men



A boy may cry; a man conceals his pain.

NELSON MANDELA, *LONG WALK TO FREEDOM*

HE HAD BEEN TALKING FREELY ABOUT HIMSELF AND HIS CHILD AND THE DEMANDS OF EVERYDAY LIFE, AND

THEN HE STOPPED AND LOOKED UP AT THE CEILING. The other men in the room, seated in a circle along with me, waited patiently and curiously for Ted to continue. We had gathered in Columbus, Ohio to discuss the challenges for fathers of children with disabilities. Before long the waiting became uneasy, so I asked Ted if there was anything else he wanted to share.

Still looking at the ceiling, he answered hesitantly, "There's so much I want to say, but if I say any more, I'll cry . . . and I don't think I'll be able to stop."

It became obvious that he was looking up to keep the tears in his eyes from overflowing. As he slowly lowered his head and faced the other men, a tear rolled down his left cheek. What occurred was an awkward but tender expression of male emotion. The man who was sitting on his right reached over and put his arm around Ted. This incident was the catalyst for the other men to open up, with tears in their eyes and deep feeling in their voices.

Ted's openness released the other men from the taboo against expressing their feelings. Is it because they have held it in so long that men believe that if they cry the tears won't stop? Are they afraid to violate the male code and be considered weak or feminine if they don't just suck it up and deny that anything is really bothering them and that they are hurting? Why is it relatively easy for men to talk about their kids or school systems and so hard to talk about themselves? Clearly it is hard to sit still and listen. Men jump into problem-solving mode, especially when they lack the words to express what they are experiencing. Yet they yearn for connection, and given time, they can open up.

Reflections on Male Emotions

Why are men such a mystery to themselves and one another as well as to the women and children in their lives? As I learned from my own father, who had grown up in an orphanage, “Boys cry on the inside.” Leading a men’s group is a special challenge because men’s emotions are so routinely cloaked. It begins early in childhood. Boys want desperately to fit in and are terrified of being called a sissy. It helps to remind men that women appreciate the strength it takes to open up.

I remember clearly the first time I ran home crying at 6 years of age after a fight with another boy in our neighborhood. Instead of being comforted, I was ordered to go back out there and handle it myself because “big boys don’t cry.” Being more afraid of my father than the neighborhood boys, I went back out, got in a few licks, and never ran home crying again. I learned that day not to talk about what upset or frightened me.

In *Finding Our Fathers*, Sam Osherson helps readers to explore the enduring impact of fathers on the lives of their children and their key role in their children’s identity. How men deal with women, other men, and children can often be linked to unresolved matters with their own fathers. In the world of work, men are also influenced strongly by their fathers. Many men, as well as women, struggle alone with their relationship to their fathers in order to arrive at a sense of completion in this central relationship. Most men I have met want to be better fathers than they had and want their sons to feel closer to them than they felt to their fathers.

I was 29 years old the first time I saw my father cry. It was also the first time since my childhood that I could not hold my tears in. My brother Don, 6 years my junior, died in a car accident in 1977. Understanding this loss and what I learned about my father, my grandfather, and myself puts my own male development into perspective. I had recently married for the first time. I am the oldest of my parents’ eight children, and Don was fourth and still living with my parents at the time. It was a cold, windy December night. I was careful to avoid the patches of ice on the road as I drove home from a party.

I went to sleep expecting to hear from Don early in the morning, as he and I had spoken that previous afternoon and had planned to meet and go jogging. When I woke up to the telephone ringing early that Sunday morning, I expected it to be him. Instead it was my mother telling me the news—my brother had been in a head-on crash in his pickup truck. Someone had skidded on the ice. The other driver was in critical condition. Don was gone.

“He was going to call me this morning,” I kept repeating to her. She asked me to come right away. My head was spinning, but I sprang into action. As I dressed hurriedly, I kept thinking it couldn’t be. That telephone call was supposed to be him. The frigid December air filled my lungs as I started my 1971 Volkswagen Beetle. The ride, which routinely took 20 minutes, went quickly. I needed more time, but there was none. My family’s home loomed before me.

When I pulled into the driveway, my father came out to meet me. He had been waiting for me by the window. He ran across the frost-covered grass to me and hugged me, weeping profusely. I could feel his chest heaving next to mine and his whole body shaking.

This was the first time he had hugged me since I was a little boy when he got home from work and sat me on his lap. It was the first time I had ever seen him cry. I had seen him mad and sad, and more often grumpy, but never in tears. It was my first confirmation that Don's death was real—I would never see my brother alive again. In that outpouring of male emotion I was released—if my Daddy could cry, then so could I. But not yet. I had to help my parents.

My memories of my mother that morning are not as clear, probably because I had seen her cry before and knew what her sobs sounded like. It did not take a death to release her tears, and her normal mood usually returned in a relatively short time. This time, though, she was devastated. She would become physically sick with her grief for many months. For more than 20 years she got sick every year on the anniversary of my brother's death.

A little later my grandfather called: "Hello, Robert . . ." His voice broke, and he just sobbed uncontrollably. The other man in my life who never cried, my other male role model, was in tears. I wanted to console him, but I did not know how. Later that day he managed to hold it in, yet I saw the pain in his eyes. I kept busy that morning calling relatives and friends and asking them to pass the word along. I was upset; my voice shook, but I did not cry. I felt that I had to be strong and help my parents. As the oldest, this was my job, and I wanted to do it well.

In the afternoon I went home, got in the shower, and turned on the warm water . . . and then the tears came. My whole body shook as my tears mingled with the warm water and washed over me. I had not willed them to start, and I could not will them to stop. After what seemed like a long time, my body slowly stopped shaking. My mind, my heart, my whole being was inundated with grief. All of my muscles had been heavy, but now they were relaxed.

The days that followed blur in my memory, but my images of Don's funeral are crystal clear. I can still see the sadness and the tears and hear the sobs and consolations of my grandparents, my aunts and uncles, my cousins and friends, and Don's many friends. The church was filled with people in shock—there is something unusually compelling about the sudden death of a healthy young person with his life in front of him. Add to that Don's naturally pleasant disposition and engaging smile and the dimensions of the loss become more defined.

People kept asking me how my parents were doing. Nobody asked how my brothers and sisters or I were doing. Actually, I did not have words for how I was doing. My brothers and I were the pallbearers, and my sisters were with my parents and grandparents. They were crying, and we were sucking it up and acting, or rather pretending, to be brave.

The casket was heavy with our family's grief. When we put it down at the gravesite, I burst out sobbing, even though I was trying to hold it in. I recall my

brother Rich putting his arm around me in a firm yet gentle way, and gradually I regained my composure.

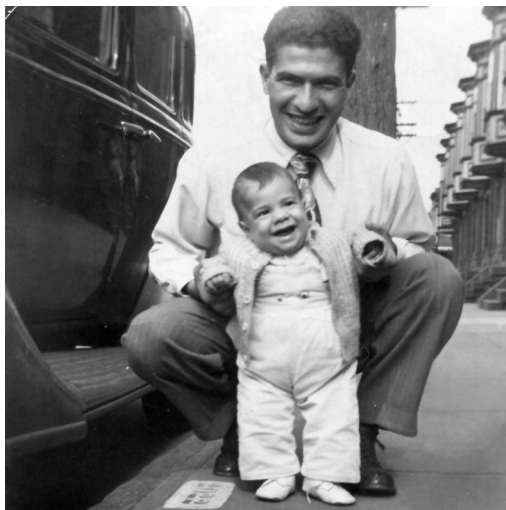
As I understand now, that outpouring of feelings by my father, my grandfather, and my brothers was the beginning of the growth of my emotional life as a man—as a more authentic person. I wish there had been an easier way, but this was the path my life took. Then Tariq by his very existence challenged me to grow further.

Tariq's autism led me to explore my relationship with my father. Fathers are the most influential men in the lives of both men and women. Boys and men often connect through competition, sometimes inflicting wounds or reopening old ones in the process. Osherson (1986) presented this as a normal but unpleasant tension between men and boys as well as between fathers and sons. Men have a desire to connect despite having been taught to shun vulnerability to avoid being hurt. This explains why men seem more comfortable expressing their feelings indirectly through stories about their struggles rather than by directly stating their feelings.

I remember how excited I was as a young boy when my father came home from work. How little and insignificant I felt when he was mad at me, and how terrified I was when he would take off his belt, and yet how warm and wonderful it was when he would put me on his knee and say, "How's Daddy's little boy?" I remember the many conflicts with my father over politics and lifestyle when I was in college and in my younger adult years. Over time we eventually reconciled many of our differences and learned to respect those that remained. Many men find it difficult to open up with their fathers or even to talk about this with other men.

When my father died peacefully at home after a long illness in 2000, I read a short excerpt from e.e. cummings about his relationship with his father. It captured my feelings towards my dad so well. Cummings wrote that his father was a true father because his dad loved him. So, cummings loved him back. As a child he worshipped his father. In his youth he battled his father, and as men they understood each other. Through it all they loved each other.

For me, it was true. I adored him as Tariq still adores me. As a teenager and a young man, I battled him over everything from the Vietnam War to the civil rights movement to religion. I have mourned that it was not the kind of battle I can



My dad felt the same way about me that I felt about Tariq.

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by Robert A. Naseef, Ph.D.

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ever have with my son. At the end of his life, however, I was fortunate to understand him and myself a little better. His mother had a stroke in childbirth and never recovered. She never cared for him, as she needed to be cared for herself. Orphaned by the age of 8, he was never mothered and grew up in an orphanage. He was nurtured by his sister Selma, who was only 13 at the time. Yet he was determined to give his children a better start. He proudly raised eight of us and told me how proud his father would have been to have seen that.

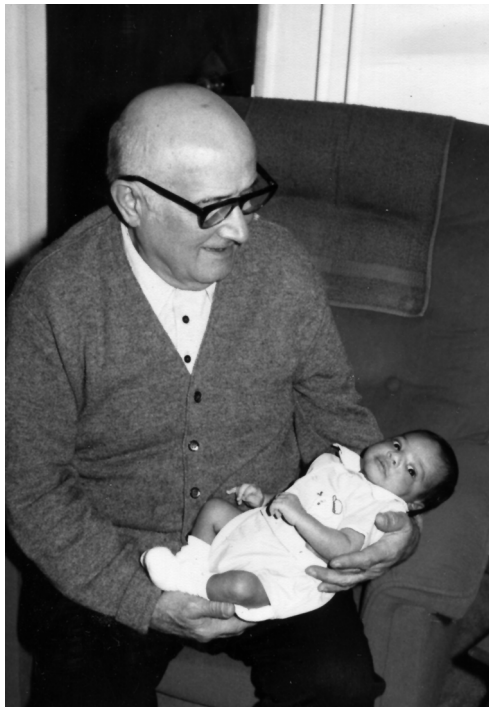
Working with Men

Men are supposed to be the strong, silent gender, and most if not all of their experiences with intense passions are alone, unspoken, and unshared. What a relief it is, I have found from my own experiences, to tell your story and to feel empathy from other men. So often men just want to be heard and appreciated as friends. I have been able to develop this skill at opening up through my own therapy as well as by participating in and leading groups.

I have learned how to relate more quickly and deeply, particularly with men, in both my personal and professional lives. Perhaps it is listening a little differently or asking one more question and waiting a little longer for the answer that makes my interactions richer and fuller. Instead of avoiding what makes me uncomfortable in my everyday personal relationships, I have become more able to wrestle with my difficulties as a husband, son, brother, father, or friend.

Several years ago I was counseling the parents of an adult child with autism and ID. When I met the young man's father, I asked him what it meant to have a child who was named after him and who had autism. "You know; you've been through it," he responded. How often men make comments such as this as a way of joining with another man but still avoiding really sharing what is going on. Opening up is not usually considered manly.

I responded, "I know what it's been like for me. Can you tell me a little about what it's been like for you?" That is all it took—that one more question—for him



Tariq and my grand pop

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to open up about his disappointments and his worries about the future. What bothered him most was that his son could never be fully independent and that his other son and his daughters would feel burdened by looking after their sibling after their parents were gone. These worries about the future are common for fathers as well as mothers. Once he told me these things, I could help him.

The New Man

Men frequently react in extreme ways, and fathers of children with disabilities such as autism fit this pattern. They are either very involved or withdrawn and virtually absent from interactions with professionals—with the majority seemingly uninvolved. Based on this observation, many professionals assume that fathers do not wish to be involved. Is this really the case, or do men grieve and cope differently and hence react and involve themselves in different ways?

Men are often poorly represented at IEP meetings, conferences, and support groups for parents of children with autism. Where are they? Usually they are at home watching the children so that the women can attend, but as the primary caregivers the women still feel overburdened and stressed out. The men, at home, think they are helping out. They generally prefer to help out by doing things as opposed to connecting by talking about the stresses and strains of everyday life. What a bind for both men and women to be in.

Until the 1970s, the role of fathers in child development was largely ignored in the professional literature. Although they were regarded as providers and protectors, fathers were not expected to be involved in daily parenting, with the notable exception of discipline. Who of a certain age, for example, doesn't remember hearing "Wait until your father gets home!"? In emphasizing the undeniable importance of mothers, social scientists lost sight of the father and the larger family context. The word *parent* became synonymous with *mother*. This same trend applied to fathers of children with disabilities. Consequently, the literature about these fathers is limited.

By the time fathers were rediscovered, many men were frustrated with their traditional roles. They found that the duty to be a successful breadwinner sometimes choked the natural instinct to nurture. They realized that they could be tender and nurturing with their children and provide discipline, too. As more and more women began to work outside the home, fathers out of necessity became more involved in the daily care of their children.

Cross-cultural studies reported by anthropologist Wade Mackey (1985) showed that when men spent time with children alone, they behaved much like women in their physical interactions, particularly in terms of nurturing. This was true on every continent and in every social class regardless of the gender of the child. The model of the indifferent, unavailable father figure was not sustained. Check this out for yourself the next time you go to the playground and see a father alone with his child.

Developmental psychologist Michael Lamb (1997), a leading scholar on fathers, reviewed studies that revealed some significant differences between

mothers' and fathers' behaviors with their newborn infants. Mothers spend more time attending to the infants' basic needs, whereas fathers tend to play more. Fathers are also more vigorous and rougher in their play than mothers. Both fathers and mothers adapt their play to the child's developmental level, which implies that fathers as well as mothers are sensitive to child development.



Tariq and I engage in typical father-son play.

Lamb (1997) also found a consensus in the professional literature that mothers and fathers initially respond differently to a child with a disability. Fathers seem less emotional and traditionally focus more on long-term problems such as the financial burden. Mothers respond more openly with their emotions and are more concerned with the challenges of the daily care of the child. Fathers who are less involved in daily interactions with their children tend to have a prolonged period of denial about the disability and its implications. The growing literature about men reveals that men express their feelings differently.

It has been presumed in the professional literature that fathers have higher expectations for their sons and therefore are more disappointed when these sons cannot live up to their dreams. It is a strong blow to the male ego when the father has no heir apparent to his throne. The mother, likewise, has been unable to produce an heir, and both have been deprived of a chip off the old block.

Strong scientific data shed some light on these generalizations. Sociologists Morgan, Lye, and Condran (1998) conducted a study of 15,000 families and concluded that a family constellation with a boy is most likely to keep the parents together. Having a son tends to draw the father into a more active parenting role, and having more than one tends to cement the involvement. Morgan also reported a startling statistic: He estimated that each son in a family reduces the parents' risk of divorce by 9%.

In terms of social support outside the marriage or primary relationship, the trend is to socialize with other couples, as described by Stuart Miller in *Men and Friendship*. Women, in contrast, show a strong tendency to maintain their circles of friends. Having a child with autism, which tends to isolate parents even more, makes it even more difficult for men to maintain and build connections with other men. What do you do when you cannot brag about your child's accomplishments in the way other men do? What do you even say when you are asked how your child is doing? How do you handle that choked-up feeling you get when you are searching for the right words? This is part of the secret life of men who are raising a child with autism.

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I wanted to be a better parent than my father when I held my son Tariq for the first time in 1979. I also expected Tariq to become a better son, a better man than me. I looked at my son and saw myself, only better. His diagnosis of classic autism with mental retardation shattered that reflected vision like a broken mirror.

This broken mirror leaves many fathers, especially those of boys with autism, feeling powerless and shamed. They love their children and do not want to fail them. This sequence occurs for men generally, as described by psychologist David Wexler in *Men in Therapy*. Hearing from fathers helps open up powerful and liberating conversations.

When it comes to emotions, there is a male imperative to suck it up. Expressing tender feelings is traditionally seen as weak. So men tend to cry on the inside. On the outside they may be grumpy and irritable, but on the inside they are hurting. Life does not stand still and wait for them. Their families need them to express themselves and to show up and be present day after day.

Because expressing vulnerable feelings violates unwritten and unspoken codes of the male gender, asking a man how he feels evokes an automatic “I don’t know” response, resulting in frustration and distance for his partner. What helps men to express themselves, especially when they are living with a child with autism?

What I have found in my work is that men can begin to learn to express themselves in groups of men or even in one-to-one conversations. Many men prefer to open up to a female therapist because they find this less threatening. Without the fear of performing poorly or being wrong there is a sense of safety from shame. When this opening up happens, men can later begin to express themselves with women. Then, because it is okay to open up in treatment, they can open up in general, particularly to their female partner. Opening up to other men may be harder and may be more easily facilitated in a group led by either a man or a woman.

Asking a man how he feels is not necessarily an effective way to get him to talk. Try to say things in guy talk to help, such as

- Tell me your story.
- What’s it like for you? (Curiosity works better than empathy.)
- Tell me more.
- I need to know to be closer to you as your friend/wife/brother/etc.
- Your child needs you.
- It takes courage to open up, and I admire you for that.
- Let’s figure out a plan to go forward.

Most men in a supportive environment with other fathers readily discuss their frustrations as men and as fathers and the strain that their child’s autism has placed on their marriages. Many openly confess that their wives are dissatisfied

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with how they are handling things. They also divulge that they have worried privately whether their marriage will survive. The romance seems long gone for many, along with most or all of their sexual relationship, and they have little hope of bringing it back. Most of them have never really talked like this before to one another even if their children go to the same school or they live in the same neighborhood. They always comment on how much more open they are in the presence of other men. Listening and disclosing needs to happen slowly for men, as they are more easily overwhelmed by tender emotions. Living day by day is how I grow and help others.

Getting into the Real Stuff: Connecting Through Anger

There is a typical male code for handling overwhelming emotions. What are men expected to do in the face of an overwhelming experience such as autism? Keep the lid on emotions, take charge of practical details, support others, and take on the challenge as a chance to problem-solve or even a test of traditional masculinity are all part of the script. However, men are not supposed to lose control, to openly cry, to worry, or to express overwhelming sadness.

In *Uncommon Fathers*, Robertson (1995) worried that his anger would overpower his love for his daughter Katie, who was born with severe brain damage. He found himself more cheerful when he was actively involved with his wife in helping to meet Katie's needs and wants. Standing by and watching his child's struggle and his wife's pain was more heartbreaking than pitching in and helping. Robertson found a parallel in *Beauty and the Beast*, in which a spell is broken when the hero comes to love another human being as much as he loves himself. In caring for a child with special needs, a father can learn about love and break the grip of the grief.

"When I hug my son, he doesn't hug me back," said a father at a conference in Cincinnati. Ten fathers of children with developmental disabilities and two male behavior specialists who worked with their children sat around a table one Friday evening waiting to hear what I had to say about being the father of an adult child with autism. They were wondering what it would be like. Only a few had ever been to such a gathering. All 10 fathers had children on the autism spectrum ranging in age from 6 to 24. Before the discussion began I told them that nothing they said would be wrong. They seemed relieved; then I invited them to share their experiences.

It was no accident that "When I hug my son, he doesn't hug me back" resonated in their hearts. Autism at its core is a social disorder of relating and communicating. Mothers have the same heartbreaking moments. It is just that fathers are far less likely to verbalize their experience.

It is a myth that children and adults with autism do not connect to other people. But they are not easy to bond with. Another father shared that his 7-year-old son connects in some ways and not others. This was a rare opportunity for fathers to bond with one another and experience fellowship.

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It felt good to create that space for men by sharing bits of my own journey. Some of their children were nonverbal, some spoke slowly, and others could not stop talking. One father mentioned that his son, who was slow to speak, forced others to slow down. Because their children connect and speak differently, parents have to pay attention closely. They engage their parents in a different way.

The men talked about their struggles and what they were learning. For example, the type of discipline many of their fathers had used with them just did not work with their own children. Some spoke of the “belt lessons” they had received, and others described the shame they had felt when they had not met their fathers’ expectations. One man shared how he was still learning to be a father after 5 years. Others were finding that they could not shape their children into who they had expected them to be. They were making new dreams, yet they worried about the future. Sharing that he was never known for patience, another man spoke of how much more patient he was becoming with his son, who “spoke in slow motion.” One 18-year-old still loved to wear Barney T-shirts. His dad found sweetness and innocence in that but worried about him being targeted by bullies.

Finally we discussed things they enjoyed doing with their sons and daughters. Some were not sure, so I just encouraged them to search and explore for those moments that might not be planned. Another man shared how he had decided to take his son, who was nonverbal, with him on a Saturday morning while running errands. He enjoyed having his boy along, but he was not sure whether his son actually liked it. Warm memories of riding with his dad opened up because he had really enjoyed that one-to-one time with his father. When he got home, he wrote on Facebook about having a good time running errands with his son. Several friends wrote back saying that they too had loved running errands with their dads. He had stumbled on happiness with his son.

My approach was not focused on replacing negative thoughts. It was not sugarcoating their often exasperating lives. It was not ranting about the injustice of it all, although that was allowed to happen freely. I tried to help these men find balance so that they could be honest about the frustrations and sorrows that come and go while also seeing and feeling the moments of meaning and happiness that also come and go. When people are open to living in this way, they find real happiness. This is what it is like to be a father or a mother of a child with autism. But even more, this is what it is like to live.

In April 2011, I was the guest speaker for the opening of the Autism Resource Center by the Ontario Arc. When I met with the fathers and male therapists, one man burst out, “I am just so angry!” His voice shaking, he expressed what other men in the circle were thinking and feeling:

When I get home and approach my son, he pushes me away. I can’t stand it anymore. He just wants his mother, and he pushes me away from her too. The other day I told my wife I am ready to sign my parental rights away.

Alex loved his son but hated how hard it could be to connect. Once the anger was out on the table, the whole group of men seemed to open up. Inside the shell of anger, the men found fear, sadness, guilt, and shame. Their honesty with one another opened the door to possibilities for connecting with their children. The man who started the discussion did not come to disown his son—he came to find out what he could do to improve his relationship.

Another man talked about how getting on the floor with his son and just tickling opened the door to the possibilities of playing together. Others shared what they could do with their children and how to follow the child's lead, and those still at a loss got ideas and inspiration. They planned to meet again. The next day at a parents' workshop, I met Alex's wife. Jen approached me to say that Alex had come home determined to find ways of connecting with their son. Maybe now she could get some breaks. She was so grateful that there was now a fathers group in their town, and the men have met monthly ever since, sharing their struggles and their successes.

Understanding Male Depression

Terrence Real's landmark book *I Don't Want to Talk About It: Overcoming the Secret Legacy of Male Depression* helps explain why men hide their emotions from everyone, including themselves. Real (1998) understood typical male symptoms—difficulty with expressiveness, workaholism, alcoholism, abusive behavior, and rage—as attempts to escape depression. But manifesting pain differently than girls or women and directing it outward hurts the people they love.

Girls and women tend to internalize pain and blame themselves. Boys and men, in contrast, tend to externalize pain, feel victimized, become angry, and act out. Among girls or women, depression is usually overt and includes symptoms of hopelessness, helplessness, and despair. Both men and boys, in contrast, experience a covert form of depression that is manifested by an emotional numbness—not just feeling bad but really not feeling at all. This numbness has been termed *alexithymia*, and it represents a difficulty identifying and expressing feelings. Levant (Levant & Pollack, 1998) estimated that close to 80% of men in the United States have a mild to severe form of it.

“Men may excel at building empires, but we're not much for taking care of ourselves,” according to Geoffrey Cowley (2003). Generally speaking, men are not very good at taking care of themselves. As a striking illustration, consider that women live 5 years longer on average than men, who are less likely to receive needed medical care as well as social and emotional support. Much of the gap in life expectancy has to do with how hard it can be for men to admit or even recognize their vulnerabilities. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (2009), more than 6 million men experience clinical levels of depression each year. These statistics are the modern confirmation of what Thoreau wrote in *Walden* during the 18th century: “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation” (2012, p. 4).

What comes up first in conversation for fathers who have a child with autism is the stress that men live with. It is easy for a man to say that he is stressed. A man does not want to say that he is depressed, but he will admit to being stressed and worrying about the future. I keep asking, “What’s it like for you now?” They talk about the shock, the disbelief, the refusal to believe that there is anything wrong with their sons or daughters. Some even say that refusing to believe the diagnosis has hurt their wife and family. There can be guilt and determination to make up for it. Of course men worry about the future. Where will their kids live? Who will take care of them?

The cure for this covert depression, according to Real (1998), is overt depression. He saw grief as the cure. While depression freezes men’s emotions, sadness flows. Sadness and anger are feelings that will run their course. Tears come and taper off if one does not hold them back. The gender code deprives men of their hearts and therefore must be challenged. According to psychologist Pollack (1998), this is a “gender straightjacket” (p. xxiv). The fear of vulnerability blocks the connection and intimacy that most men actually long for. In my work, I help men to find their softer side through exploring their relationship with their fathers and their children. More often than not, sharing pain is the way to lessen it. If a disconnection from feeling is at the root of male depression, then connection relieves it. As I continue to see in myself and others, taking care of a child with autism can drive and inspire a man to grow to his fullest potential.

Finding Our Fathers

It is important for men to reflect on their own fathers—especially on some of the warm moments that often bring up some of the painful ones. The point is for men to go into their minds and hearts and then share it. Sharing the experience of being a son, because of the shame so often experienced in that relationship, can be the most difficult challenge in opening up. Some men have fathers who are no longer alive; others may not be on speaking terms with their fathers; and addictions or other problems have ruined still others’ father–son relationships. The shame, anger, sadness, and loss that men often express when they are able to relate their experiences as sons are similar to the emotions that they are experiencing in their relationships with their own children. It is usually a relief to talk about these vital experiences that have been bottled up.

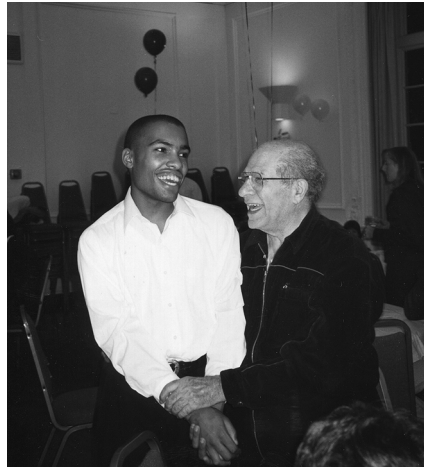
On a snowy January night in Richmond, Virginia, 75 fathers of children with autism turned out for a presentation titled “The Father Factor.” They came ostensibly to hear me talk to them about the issues they face day and night with their families. They did more than listen. First they showed up, and that turn-out alone said something. It said that their local chapter of the Autism Society of America (www.asacv.org) recognized the need for programming that spoke directly to fathers. It said that men responded when they were spoken to directly. It happened because some mothers had discovered the presenter at a national

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conference, planned and organized the event, and encouraged the men to attend.

After a brief talk about my background as a son and a father, I asked the men to share their stories with one another in small groups around the tables at which they were seated. The energy level in the room rose as they connected with one another. In every small group, men commented on how alone they had felt and how much they enjoyed meeting one another. Many had never attended an Autism Society event before. Those who had mentioned that there had been few if any men present, so they had just listened.



Tariq and my dad at Tariq's 20th birthday party

A short, compelling video, *Fathers' Voices*, about men raising children with disabilities, was shown. The film, which is from the Washington State Fathers Network, focuses on four dads, including the father of a child with autism, and how their lives have been dramatically changed because of their children. Filled with the powerful message of the movie, the men opened up in their small groups about their own thoughts and feelings. I asked them to recall their sweetest memories of their own fathers and the male role models they carried with them. These insights were then offered within the larger group of all who were present.

Here are some of the highlights:

- "When I was really unhappy, he advised me to quit my job and be my own person."
- "We can always come together around baseball even though we are not close."
- "When I played Little League, my dad was always hiding behind a telephone pole telling me where to be on the baseball diamond."
- "My dad took me on trips and let me use a map to help him navigate."
- "Dad taught me how to shave, and now I shave him in old age."
- "When he was deployed overseas in the Army, my dad would bring back toys from overseas and make us find them."
- "Watching him care for my mom, who has Parkinson's now, makes me proud of my dad."
- "My dad gave me what he thought was my first drink and told me how proud he was of me now that I had turned 21."

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by Robert A. Naseef, Ph.D.

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Finding Our Sons and Daughters

In Richmond, as I do with all of the fathers I meet, I discussed how men can apply what they knew about fatherhood from their own lives to their overwhelming mission of raising a child on the autism spectrum. What stands out is men remembering the time they spent one to one with their fathers doing simple things: doing chores, running errands, going to baseball games, fishing, and so forth. Many had lost sight of what they could do with their children while overwhelmed in the world of therapies, special education, and doctor visits. Recalling special memories with fathers and male role models helps people think about how they can relate to their own children according to their individuals wants, needs, and abilities.

Even though they cannot fix the autism, there is a sense of hope that fathers can do something about their relationship with their child. After 2 hours of open and honest discussion, men lingered, talking and holding on to the moment. There are plenty of good men in the autism community, and not just in Richmond. I have taken notes from the men in the support groups I facilitate for fathers of children with autism and other special needs as well as from dads in my psychology practice. In groups they have the opportunity to help one another and to experience the fact that their difficulties are normal in their situation. They experience acceptance from other men when they open up and share their pain. I will share here some of their stories.

“If my dad gave up on me, I’d be the school janitor. I was mad at the world. My dad helped me to find my passion, and helped me to overcome my obstacles.” This comes from Frank, who has a learning disability and whose son has Asperger syndrome. Today Frank is the successful executive of a Fortune 500 company:

When my son was first diagnosed, I thought he might never make janitor. Now 10 years later, he is doing well, and it looks like he can go to college [with a support program]. I took a lesson from my own father about how to believe in him.

But just like the automobile commercials that state “actual mileage may vary,” the symptoms and outcomes vary. “They tell me it’s hard to be the father of a typical kid. I wouldn’t know.” This comes from Larry, who has a son with Asperger syndrome and another boy with PDD. He feels depressed when school is out and his children cannot go out and play with the other children, for they do not know how to interact.



My dad tells Tariq to look at the camera on family day at Devereux.

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Maurice, who has a child with Down syndrome, shares his dilemma:

I come here and talk with you guys, and I get my feelings out. I feel cleansed. Then I go home and act like a husband—it's like I think I get points for being remote. So that's how I have been acting. I hear what you guys are saying about opening up at home, but I still act like my wife and kids need me to hold it in and appear strong. I'm not sure I can get over that. I'm not sure I want to.

Jeff also has two children with autism:

You can't fix it, so you learn to live with it. My wife feels like she is to blame, and I haven't been able to help her get over that. We try to give each other hope, but it's hard. She says I don't smile enough. I'm not sure I can remember the last time I smiled. I love my boys so much, but between me and my wife it's like one beggar who found a piece of bread sharing it. I just want to smile more.

It's a delicate balance of hope and reality—accepting the news about a child's condition and working for the best. Men struggle with their anger through this process. “My fuse is much shorter now,” according to Sal whose son is on the severe end of the autism spectrum. “I've started to exercise, and now my fuse is getting longer. I've just got to be nicer to my wife and children. Julie accepts me, but I don't always deserve her. I can't melt down. I'm there taking care of my family the best I can. Someone has to be the rock. I cry when I'm alone in the car, but I stay rational at home.” What helps? The men I talk with tell me they want to be appreciated for their loyalty to their families. They want to be recognized for trying their best.

They are learning as they go. Here are a few of the lessons fathers have shared with me:

- “I have a different relationship with work. It's not my whole life anymore.”
- “My daughter has taught me to appreciate life in a profound way.”
- “I have learned to see past what my son isn't and focus on who he is.”
- “My children's smiles are my smiles—they light up my life.”
- “My father had a horrible temper. I was determined to do better. My daughter's disability taught me to accept what I could not change without bitterness.”
- “I am a fixer, and I can't fix this. There is no wrench to pull out of my toolbox. I have learned to just be there for my family.”
- “When I get home at night and my kids run to greet me and laugh—that is the best part of my day.”

James May, the retired founder of the Fathers Network, put it this way: “The old myths are far flung—and deeply held—that men are hard driven, inexpressive, pragmatic creatures, devoid of strong emotions or the capacity to nurture, always more at home with work than with their families.” Numerous articles and photographs on the web site shatter these stereotypes. There people

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can read accounts by many fathers about their journeys through grief and depression as they love and care for their children.

Professionals who are not sure what fathers in this situation need should get them together as a group and ask them. The ideas collected in *Fathers of Children with Special Needs: New Horizons* by James May can be a helpful guide. The fathers can tell you everything you want and need to know, but you have to question and listen skillfully because the male imperative to be strong in the face of tragedy can be tricky to overcome. In a males-only meeting, it is more likely that fathers can take off their armor and get to the real stuff inside.

Make a Plan

It is obvious that men have a different tone of voice than women and a different way of connecting. Male intimacy is different from female intimacy but not defective. Connecting with other fathers can have a dramatic and powerful impact on a man's ability to interact with his partner and his children. Although men certainly need to learn how to listen and open up, they relate best through action.

It is hard for men in general and fathers of kids with autism in particular to admit that they need help. They want to be able to handle things, but the truth is that they lead a really difficult life. Men respond better to having some kind of action plan. So the action plan I give people is this: Find something you enjoy doing with your child. You may have to start with something your child enjoys that you yourself are not really into. But start with that. Make contact. And from that contact, find the things you both enjoy doing together. That is your action plan.

When you first try to do it, it may not be easy or natural. Observe whatever happens in your mind—your thoughts, your feelings, your impulses, and the sensations in your body. Are you getting stiff and sore? Are you having trouble breathing? Observe while you are engaging with your child, and then talk to somebody about it. That way, the next time you come back to a meeting with moms and dads or a meeting with just dads, you have something to contribute. That can be another part of your action plan. I encourage men to have conversations with other men about how to connect with their son or daughter. Watch how other people join in; watch how you connect.

I recently got an e-mail from a father in upstate Pennsylvania who told me, “You’ve changed my life.” I was incredulous. He said, “You gave me the assignment to find something I enjoy doing with my son 5 years ago and I did it, it changed my life. I have a relationship with my son now and it feels so good to me.” Parents do not control autism; there is no cure, and it waxes and wanes often unpredictably. Some kids make dramatic progress, and some make only a little bit. What parents do have a lot of control over and a lot of impact on is their relationships. Focusing on your relationships is an action plan—try it, and see where it can take you.