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Renegotiating paternal identity following stillbirth: what and who am I?

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Research Study

Introduction

This study examines the experiences of men following stillbirth in particular the challenges they face in claiming their identity as a father of an absent child. Fathers felt diminished when concerns about how they were coping were directed only to the women. Contrary to the notion that father's experience suggests men suffer less distress, this research shows that men also deal with loss at an emotional level.

Methods

This investigation into men's accounts of loss forms part of a larger study in which twenty-eight men and women participated in interviews and focus groups about their experiences of perinatal death.

Results

By listening to narrative accounts of loss, the passage to parenthood for bereaved men represents a disruption and re evaluation of who they are, what they knew about the world as they negotiate the incomprehensibility of the death itself.

Discussion

The findings suggest that recognition of the death of baby who is stillborn as well as the impact of the death for father's is intertwined with personal identity. Men in this study needed to receive recognition as fathers, both at the time of their loss and after. In examining the reproductive and bereavement journey of men. The findings of this research will offer insight into the experiences of men that will resonate for others including practitioners who support individuals going through similar experiences.

Claiming fatherhood

On holding the baby:

"Holding my son, you know. I don't know if I would have done that, unless those people around me hadn't suggested that, that was a good idea you know. It's obviously a moment I treasure. It's an important, very important physical experience. Purely on a physical level I'd kind of go this is a body I have had a hand in creating. This is something like on a kind of animal level that I need to have this close physical experience..." [Karl, father of baby boy Bryn, stillborn at forty weeks].

Karl's narrative represents an isolating experience in holding his son. In trying to make sense, the father attempts to locate his experience between the physical and existential. While his fatherhood is defined as a physical contribution it contributes to an ambivalent sense of identity about being a parent/non-parent/bereaved parent. Despite attendance at ultrasound scans and opportunities to personify the baby, this sense of ambivalence continued until the birth of a subsequent live child:

Subsequent birth:

"It's different for the father. They have very little physical relationship to that baby, to that body. I was focused on wow, we've got a live baby, you know and being properly feeling like a Dad for the first time. In that sense I didn't feel like that with Bryn (first child who died) even though in some ways I did. The way I related to Bryn was like he was a man already, it felt like he was holding us at the time and he felt like somebody I knew intimately."

This account defines the juncture at which Karl felt like a Dad. A different relationship has been formed with his deceased son and continues as though he holds his father in his deepest moments of grief. It also continues on the theme of ambivalence and confusion about when he feels able to claim fatherhood. Other men, attempted to address their ambivalent sense of identity by finding ways in which to memorialise their baby.

Parenting in absence:

"There were things like designing a headstone to go on his grave and things like that. That was hard. That didn't feel like anything right. It was the best we could have done for Isaac and we always try and make sure Isaac's grave is kept clean and the flowers look nice. There are no nappies to change. There is nothing we can do for him practically, he is always on our minds and in our hearts, he is with us everywhere we go but there is nothing we can do for him..." [Jamie, father of baby boy Isaac, stillborn 39 weeks].

Jamie discussed negotiating coming to terms with an ambivalent sense of parenthood while trying to claim the bond with this child. While Jamie is unable to provide the physical aspects of care, his son has been transformed into his inner world, his emotional self and in his daily life.

Men's accounts of loss

The impact of the death:

"It was absolutely devastating. The days afterwards, it was dark, miserable and raining. I've never been suicidal and I hope I never am but it's the closest I can imagine being. You almost got to the stage where you didn't care and then you think what is the point of anything. When you are looking over that abyss, it really becomes a horrendous abyss..." [Ian, father of baby twin girls, Melody and Joy, born at 32 weeks, lived for two hours].

While Ian was able to discuss how he was able to share his grief with his wife and experience a stronger bond during interviews, the whole point of life for Karl was in achieving fatherhood. He spoke of powerlessness and of an identity which has been threatened, especially when later, Ian reflected on the discourses available of pregnancies which have a positive outcome and which for Karl, ended in confusion. For several men, living with the knowledge that pregnancy and birth can end in tragedy means that they can be reluctant to support their partner's (bereaved mother's) decision to undertake a further pregnancy.

Subsequent pregnancies:

"My partner was incredibly keen to get pregnant. For me it was the last thing I wanted to do. The idea just seemed insane. You want to go back and have that experience again, you know what I mean? Even though everything rationally said it would be fine, that wasn't event the point... whatever could happen afterwards was just so utterly terrifying." [Jim, father of baby boy Jack, stillborn 39 weeks].

While mother's have shared their sense of heightened anxiety during subsequent pregnancies, there are few accounts of men's responses .

Seeking support

Men in this research discussed the difficulty in seeking support from others, particularly in being able to share their accounts of events. While this was in some way explained by a lack of empathic interlocutors, men felt the need for a self imposed silence to protect others. As their partners sought out means of support, some men were encouraged to accompany their partners to support groups and in so doing, found a location to share their accounts.

Support groups:

"I had the courage to go to the support group but it was very hard to step out and make your grief public and very, very difficult. ..It's almost like a secret club that people you know have been through it because you don't ram it down your friends' throat or go up to strangers and talk about it, it's very strange." [Sam, father of baby boy, Tom, stillborn at 38 weeks].

"I was hugely trepidatious about it, I kind of thought no! I couldn't think of anything worse than going and I was very scared but we did go. I don't really like speaking in groups but I found the space incredibly useful to do. Just to be able to open up a set of questions and then to hear other people's stories as well. Just that kind of sharing that seems alien to everyday life. I find that kind of family of people ,that group that kind of just knows where you've been, you know." [Jim, father of baby girl, Erin, stillborn at 36 weeks].

While men were encouraged by partner's to attend support groups, others turned to online resources, men's blogs on loss. Others attempted to claim their advocate and protector role by attempting to find answers to symptoms which may have caused the death of their baby.

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