Understanding Paternal Grief at the Loss of a Child

Barb Himes, IBCLC, Kelly D. Farley

Saving babies. Supporting families.

First Candle's efforts to support families during their most difficult times and provide new answers to help other families avoid the tragedy of the loss of their baby are without parallel.

*"June brings us Father's Day, which can be a difficult time for fathers who have lost a child. First Candle's bereavement support services have been there for fathers as well as mothers and other family members, and we have come to know Kelly D. Farley, the author of *Grieving Dads: To the Brink and Back*."*

June brings us Father's Day, which can be a difficult time for fathers who have lost a child. First Candle's bereavement support services have been there for fathers as well as mothers and other family members, and we have come to know Kelly D. Farley, the author of *Grieving Dads: To the Brink and Back*. Kelly and his wife Christine lost their daughter Katie in 2004 and their son Noah in 2006, both stillborn. It changed his life, leading him to seek help

for his grief and become involved in helping other grieving fathers.

Today he provides individual and group counseling for fathers and continues to write extensively on facing and living with paternal grief. In honor of Father's Day, we share some of his work, which may offer health care providers insights into this side of bereavement when an infant is lost to Sudden Unexpected Infant Death (SUID) or a child is lost due to other causes.

Father's Day Void

I spent two years interviewing men that have experienced the death of a child. As you can imagine, I heard a lot of heartbreaking stories. All were different, and all were bad. I also learned a lot about my own pain and suffering caused by the aftermath of burying two children. Those interviews, and my own hard lessons, are captured in my book *Grieving Dads: To the Brink and Back*.

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Because of my book and my advocacy, I receive a lot of requests to write Father's Day articles about the dark side of the day from the perspective of the guys who have had to bury a child. Is the day harder than most? Yes, but to us grieving dads, it is not much different from the holidays, birthdays, and death anniversaries. They are all difficult to navigate, and each one stirs similar but different emotions.

Did you know that premature and low birth weight babies have a 4x greater risk for SIDS?

At First Candle we're educating parents, grandparents and caregivers about safer sleep to make sure all babies reach their first birthday. Learn more at firstcandle.org

There is not a day that goes by that we do not think about our absent child. Regardless of the circumstance of their deaths, we miss them deeply. However, there are days where we feel this pain more acutely than other days. Days like Father's Day remind us that they are not here. We are keenly aware of their absence every single day, and on days like Father's Day, the hole they left grows a little bigger.

We feel a sense of emptiness on Father's Day because there is an obvious void that tends to suck the air out of the day, creating a difficult space that we do not know how to navigate. We try our best, but it is hard to explain our feelings to those that haven't lost a child. It is not fair for us to expect you to understand; you're one of the lucky ones that have never had to walk in these shoes.

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Most of us will try to keep our minds occupied with other living children or by filling the day with busy, mindless tasks. It's a defense mechanism that helps us to hide from the harsh reality that lurks in the darkness, seeking our whereabouts. It's a constant battle that we often lose in the early years. Yes, I said years.

This isn't something that goes away after a year. It's a burden that weighs heavy on our souls for the rest of our lives. However, the weight lightens dramatically as time moves forward, and we continue to process our loss. The death of a child becomes who we are. It does not define us, but it certainly changes the course of our lives and destroys the naivety we once had.

Regardless of the day, most people will not bring up the fact that your child died because it is too awkward for them. They are not sure if they should acknowledge this day. Let me resolve this confusion: you should acknowledge Father's Day.

It certainly isn't a "Happy" Father's Day. So, what should people say or do?

Try saying something like, "I know this must be a difficult day, but know I am thinking about you." This statement, or a variation of it, goes a long way with the men that are on the receiving end of it. It might trigger a visible emotion, but know the emotion constantly lurks just below the surface regardless. Though you just don't see it, it's just waiting for an opportunity to escape.

I wish all fellow grieving dads a peaceful Father's Day. If you know a grieving dad, pay them a visit, or make that phone call to tell them that you are thinking about them and their child. - KDF

Disclosure: The authors declared no conflict of interest related to work presented in this manuscript.

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Corresponding Author

Barb Himes, IBCLC
Director of Education and Bereavement Services
First Candle
49 Locust Avenue, Suite 104
New Canaan CT 06840
Telephone: 1-203-966-1300
For Grief Support: 1-800-221-7437
Email: barb@firstcandle.org
Website: www.firstcandle.org

Corresponding Author

Kelly D. Farley
Author of "Grieving Dads To the Brink and Back"
Website: <https://grievingdads.com/>
Phone: (630) 561-5989 (Call Anytime)
Email: GrievingDads@gmail.com

About First Candle

First Candle, based in New Canaan, CT, is a 501c (3) committed to eliminating Sudden Infant Death Syndrome and other sleep-related infant deaths while providing bereavement support for families who have suffered a loss. Sudden unexpected infant death (SUID), which includes SIDS and accidental suffocation and strangulation in bed (ASSB), remains the leading cause of death for babies one month to one year of age, resulting in 3,600 infant deaths nationwide per year.