

FATHERS - KEEPING IT TOGETHER

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For many years, men's mental health was not recognised as an area of special concern. However, in reality, research has demonstrated that men suffer higher rates of most non-gender specific medical conditions, are more likely to be in occupations exposing them to significant physical risk, to engage in reckless, externalizing behaviour, to consume excessive amounts of alcohol and to take illicit drugs, to be perpetrators as well as the victims of violence, to be incarcerated and to successfully complete suicide. In general, men are shown to have shorter average life expectancies and they are less likely than women to consult doctors or mental health practitioners. In short, being a man is a risky business!! (Hunter and Boyle, Graduate Studies Program – Primary Mental Health).

David Buchbinder (1996) notes that:

“Masculinity is a condition fraught with contradictions, anxieties and tensions; and its achievement and maintenance shot through with uncertainty, hostility and suspicion. That men in society do not automatically perceive masculinity in this way is a testimony to the power of patriarchal ideology, and to its ability to naturalise its demands of men-in-society so that they respond to its imperatives quite often without question. But being a man and conforming to these requirements do not go without a price being exacted on individual men. The desire to be acknowledged a man in the eyes of other men often drives individuals to take foolish risks, common instances of which include smoking, the excessive consumption of alcohol, a fascination with fast vehicles, and, of course drink driving – all of these often constituted, together with the unsafe sexual practices implicit in being a ‘stud’ as the template of masculinity for younger men.”(p 41).

Centacare Family Services in Mount Isa recognized the need to address the issue of men's mental health by providing counselling and programs that specifically cater for men.

In October 2008, the “Fathering After Separation” Program was offered to the community.

The development of the “Fathering After Separation” Program was initially funded by the Men and Family Relationships Initiative of the Family Relationships Services Program of the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services. This program invites fathers to focus on the relationship they would prefer to have with their children and uses the platform of the best interests of the child to assist fathers to choose how to respond to separation. By assisting men to establish a cooperative relationship with their former partners and keeping lines of communication open, many important decisions can be negotiated by the couple, rather than in court.

In Mount Isa, the ‘Fathering After Separation’ program was trialled on a weekly basis over six sessions each lasting three hours. The aims of the program, taken session by session are as follows.

Session 1 – To welcome the fathers and affirm the importance of being a father in contact with his children in spite of difficulties. To normalise the fathers’ experiences and feelings and to begin to view separation as being about change!

Session 2 – To practice communication strategies for an on-going relationship between the father and his former partner. To analyse separation and what fathers might begin to do differently.

Session 3 – To assist fathers to accept the end of the relationship or acknowledge their responsibility for maintaining the relationship and identify some of the things fathers could do to help with the changes of separation or adjustments to the family environment.

Session 4 – To encourage fathers to find ways to manage stress in themselves and their children,

Session 5 – To integrate information from various agencies supporting separated fathers with participants’ own ideas about how to deal with separation.

Session 6 – Celebration dinner and certificates.

The program does not use traditional psychological measuring tools to assess outcomes. The designers of the program felt that many psychological scales were time consuming and difficult to understand. As they usually take a written form, they become even more problematic when members of the client group experience literacy problems or come from non- English speaking backgrounds. Many psychological scales used to assess separated fathers, often focus on depression, suicidality and anxiety. It was considered that this could be confrontational to the men involved and may result in increased drop-out rates. The program focuses on the fathers’ own interpretations of their experiences, feelings and behaviours, demonstrating that fathers have choices in terms of how they deal with separation. As literacy skills were high in this particular group, pre- and post-program questionnaires were provided but concentrated on measuring changes related to the program aims and objectives.

Accessing clients – Centacare advertised in many different forums. Free advertising was provided by the radio stations MOB FM and 4LM. Advertisements were placed in the newspaper for three weeks prior to course commencement. Flyers were sent to be placed in school newsletters and the District Education Office circulated the information to all its contacts. Information was sent to other programs within the organization so that existing clients could be notified. It is worth noting that not one response was received from all this advertising and the client group was formulated from a sporting club which had contacted requesting parenting programs to assist with dealing with the behaviour of junior members. A number of the men were separated or trying to keep their families together and were willing to trial the program.

Language and imagery – As language can either change ideas or reinforce them, the way the program is promoted is critical. One barrier is the association between counselling and failure or personal weakness. Another psychological barrier for fathers accessing helping services is a concern about whether they will be ‘male – friendly’. The program promotes separation as being about change, redefining relationships, rethinking what ‘family’ means, creating new opportunities and improving their relationships with their

children. The program was designed in consultation with fathers as many men prefer reality based techniques and interventions based on the principles of adult education. Pre-group phone calls provided an opportunity to counter concerns and give potential participants a sense of the program. The idea that the program is an opportunity to be in contact with other fathers in similar situations is promoted. The program promotes fathers as being of assistance to other fathers rather than needing help. Fathers can then use their own experiences of separation to assist other men with similar concerns. The phone call allows the intake procedure to be conducted.

Intake – The optimal number suggested to run this program was nine participants. For the group run in Mount Isa, eight men registered. One man left town and one went on holidays and did not attend the group on his return. Six men attended on a regular basis. The program has been designed to suit groups where there is a diverse mix of fathers and their circumstances. Having a variety of experiences and backgrounds fostered mentoring and supportive relationships as the fathers were eager to share their own experiences.

Providing practical assistance – Barriers like poor literacy or aversion to agencies can inhibit fathers from accessing the service. These barriers can be overcome in practical ways within the limits of available resources. The venue selected in Mount Isa was a sporting club where the majority of the men attend and feel comfortable. The men were encouraged to bring food along to share and this built rapport within the group.

Issues for Indigenous fathers – The Fathering After Separation Program is not designed or able to take into account specific cultural concerns. In the Mount Isa group, none of the participants were Indigenous. An Indigenous men's group is available through the parish and it is possible that many Indigenous separated fathers would prefer to attend this group. In the future if any fathers from different cultural backgrounds indicate that they would like to be included, they would be warmly welcomed!

The role of the facilitator – In this program the role of the facilitator is to assist group members to interact with one another to build a supportive group environment that enables fathers to achieve their learning goals. Leader –focused activities are limited. The role of the facilitator is to manage the group process to enable the fathers to integrate their learning with the program aims. Facilitators need to have knowledge of issues relevant to separated fathers and a preparedness to focus on what the fathers are doing well. The response of fathers to the program being facilitated by a woman was very positive. The program research suggests that having a female facilitator, results in less abusive language and generalist comments denigrating women. Given that many of the fathers tended to initially blame women for many of their negative experiences of separation, this issue cannot be left solely to a female facilitator and either a male facilitator or a supportive member of the group is required to channel positive, constructive feedback to the group.

The program suggests that unless the men indicate that they are contemplating suicide, it is not necessary for the fathers to be receiving counselling when participating in the program. If a father cannot identify a supportive relationship, then it is appropriate to link him with Men's Line Australia. All participants were provided with a pack containing Men's Line brochures and other relevant information. Suicide interviews and contracts were taken to each session in case a participant expressed suicidal ideation.

Certificates – Certificates of attendance were given out at the conclusion of the program but these were records of attendance only. The men were informed during the first session of the program that no court reports would be provided. Although this program focused on fathers who have already separated, future programs will adopt an early intervention approach that will aim to target fathers who are experiencing difficulties before a separation occurs. Supporting the family and helping men understand the difficulties may result in the preservation of family unity. In Mount Isa it has been noted that separation can occur from physical separation, emotional separation as frequently occurs in the transitional period when couples are forming their family, shift work or the fly-in, fly-out situation.

Running this program has been an exciting adventure! One thing that the program does not discuss is the powerful use of humour! These guys were a lot of fun! The program suggests monthly support and education evenings as a useful tool to build community integration for participants. Ongoing support of this type has been proven to be integral to maintaining the benefits of a group process (ACT Department of Education and Community Services, 1998).

FEEDBACK FROM THE GROUP MEMBERS:

Gary says: “I believe that fathers in distress and separated fathers need a local and physical first point of contact in times of need, not a telephone service but somewhere to go, not a pub or club, but a haven for blokes”.

Peter says: “This service is a necessary group, especially in remote mining communities and has been very informative and useful for my issues and for the group on the whole”.

Chris says: “ I really thought the addition of the representatives of each of the departments (a male representatives attended from Legal Aid, The Department of Child Safety and from Centrelink and a female Family Dispute Resolution Practitioner attended from the Centacare Family Centre)”.

Graeme says: “ This was a very good program. I experienced a lot of learning. You don’t expect these things to happen to you. What some people cope with is mind-blowing. I found the sessions very beneficial and a steep learning curve”.

References:

Hunter and Boyle, The Graduate Health Studies Program, PX 801 Primary Health Care, The University Of Queensland.

Buchbinder, D (1996) Men’s Troubles: The social construction of masculinity and men’s health. In: Commonwealth Department of Health and Human Services, *Proceedings from the Men’s Health Conference*. Canberra: AGPS. (p. 41).

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