

From a novel support group to a book, learning from seven widowed fathers

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Back row, left to right: Bruce, Steve, Karl, Dan and Russ. Front row, left to right: Joe and Neill. Credit: UNC Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center

It was a seemingly unremarkable decision that started UNC Lineberger's Donald Rosenstein, MD, and Justin Yopp, PhD, on a rather remarkable

journey.

Wanting to help a [group](#) of widowed fathers who were trying to make sense of being a single parent while grieving the loss of their spouse and helping their children address the loss of a parent, the two looked for a support group for the men. When they couldn't find a widowed fathers support group in the Triangle or, in fact, anywhere, Rosenstein, a psychiatrist, and Yopp, a psychologist, decided they would create a support group that would meet once a month for six months.

It turns out that they were on to something. The group met for nearly four years at the fathers' request.

Now, seven years since the group first met, Rosenstein and Yopp have published a book with Oxford University Press, "[The Group: Seven Widowed Fathers Reimagine Life](#)," to be a resource for anyone experiencing loss and grief. The tightly written book shares poignant moments from the fathers' transformation as well as the lessons the authors learned from the men.

Yopp said the idea to write the book came, in part, from the fathers wanting to use their experiences to help others dealing with loss and grief.

"It became increasingly important to these men that the work we were doing, and they were helping us do, would help other people," said Yopp, who is an associate professor of psychiatry and a member of the UNC Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Support Program. "If the pain they've experienced could, in some way, help someone else, that was meaningful to them, and that was meaningful to us, too."

The seven men featured in the book - Neill, Dan, Bruce, Karl, Joe, Steve, and Russ - were as different as they were similar, but their shared

experience of loss brought them together, and their shared commitment to help each other kept them together.

"When they came together, there was a sense of being part of something bigger than themselves, that they had a responsibility to the other people in the group," said Rosenstein, who is a professor of psychiatry and medicine and director of the UNC Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Support Program. "I've experienced the power of group therapy, but I've never experienced anything quite like this. We saw early on that there was something very special about this particular group."

While the men found common ground on many issues, their disparate experiences with loss help make "The Group" relatable to a wide audience. Some of the stories in the book (which were shared with the men's encouragement) are humorous, such as Bruce not knowing his daughter's shoes were falling apart until she came home from school with a new pair of shoes a teacher bought her. Others, including a conversation the men had about whether the wrong parent died, are heartbreaking. These stories are intended to help the readers relate and, if they are experiencing a loss, to realize they are not alone.

The book also took aim at the idea of striving to be a perfect parent to compensate for a spouse's death.

"When bad things happen, you have a choice: Focus on what's wrong or focus on how to do the best you can under the circumstances," said Rosenstein. "These guys were trying to be dads and moms. They were trying to make it normal, and there was no way to make it normal. We told them it's ok to be a 'good enough parent.' It doesn't have to be perfect and it is not possible to make it perfect. Make it ok. Make it connected. Make it loving. Make it structured. Move it forward."

Rosenstein and Yopp are quick to point out they did not write "how-to"

guide. Their goal was to share the men's experiences to demonstrate that there is no one "right way" to deal with loss and grief.

They also didn't write a text book, though there is a discussion on theories of grief and bereavement, including a critique of the widely accepted Kubler-Ross model of grief, which suggests grief progresses linearly through five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.

Yopp and Rosenstein contend that grief doesn't follow a set path. They subscribe to the dual process model of coping with bereavement, which focuses on a natural oscillation between loss-oriented stressors related to the death itself, and restoration-oriented stressors, which are associated with restoring a life without the person who died. This theory describes how people shift or alternate their attention to these two sets of stressors rather than progressing from one stage to the next.

"So much of the focus on trauma is on looking back, but trauma is as much about the future as it is about the past," said Rosenstein. "It is about coming up with some new notion, trajectory of what you think your life is now going to be like. If you're only looking back at what was lost, you're never going to get to a new trajectory. This back and forth, this dual process model, is a very practical, helpful way of thinking about how you can adapt while doing honor to what was lost."

In addition to publishing the book, Yopp and Rosenstein relaunched and rebranded their website (it is now <http://www.widowedparent.org>) to focus on all parents who have lost a spouse or co-parent. The original site addressed the needs of widowed fathers, but the content has been expanded to provide information, videos and resources for parents whose spouse or co-parent died from any cause. There also is a dedicated section for healthcare professionals, which includes an overview on how UNC Lineberger established its support group, and a

research survey for parents who were widowed during the last two years.

"Ideally, we'd like the tens of thousands of widowed parents to have access to a support group, if they thought that would be helpful, but that isn't possible," said Yopp. "We developed our website to help address that gap by providing information, shared experiences, and videotaped conversations, and it is free and available all hours of the day."

Provided by UNC Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center

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