Strength, Plus Emotional Connection, Saves Dads from Despair

June 18, 2010 By David Evans

Aside from being a bit sillier, and more of a joker, than my friends' fathers, my dad has always fit the stereotype of a "dude." He grew up blue collar, and though he was one of those lucky baby boomers who made it into management without a college degree, he has pretty much remained a blue-collar guy to this day. He has a temper, and can speak sharply, but he's never been mean. In fact, he's one of the most gentle and tender guys I've ever known when it comes to animals and small children.

That said, my dad is not a crier, nor is he particularly good at talking about his feelings. He grew up with the expectation that men are strong, they take care of their wives and children, and they don't complain when something goes wrong. As I learned more about my own mental health, and about psychology, I came to view this as an unhealthy way to live. The prevailing attitude over the last few decades is that the more a man can get in touch with his feelings, the healthier he'll be. The fact that men commit suicide at three times the rate of women, despite being half as likely to be diagnosed with depression, has always been thrown up as a stark example of what bottling up your feelings can lead to.

New research, however, suggests that the desire to stay strong can actually have a protective effect on men. Researchers at the University of British Columbia (UBC) conducted in-depth interviews with 38 men between the ages of 20 and 50. The UBC team found that the men's desire to stay strong and protect their families, actually helped keep them from attempting suicide--provided that the men did seek at least some kind of emotional support from a friend, family member or church counselor.

My dad and I don't have deep talks. Again, that's just not something that men in my family do, at least with other guys, but I've seen the role that my grandmother, my mom and my aunts have played in their lives. I remember when my aunt Tina died suddenly when I was a boy. My uncle Frank didn't shed a tear at her funeral, but afterward, at my grandparent's house, my mom led him out into the backyard for a private moment. I peaked out the window to see what was going on, and saw him break down as my mother placed her hand on his shoulder.

That mix of strength and fortitude in public and then momentary private weakness appears to be what helped the men in the study. "Here, men's strong sense of masculine roles and responsibility

as a provider and protector enables men to hold on while seeking support to regain some self-control," says John Oliffe, PhD, one of the study's authors.

I quickly scrambled, as usual, to the gift store and the post office yesterday to send my dad a father's day card. I've learned over the years that little things like that actually do make a difference. Now that I'm in my 40s and my dad's in his 70s, the dynamic has changed somewhat. I know that the time when I'll be in a care taking roll is drawing nearer. Because he and I don't have deep talks, the cards each year and the weekly phone calls are my way of telling him that I have enormous respect for his strength and the way he always took care of us, and that he'll always be my dad--but that I'll be there if he ever needs it.

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