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Tonight: Partly cloudy with a low of 26

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News

UNC program helps grieving fathers

Published Wednesday, February 20, 2013
by [Taylor Shaw](#)



CHAPEL HILL – Three years have passed since Russell Tatum lost his wife. Now a single father raising two boys, he has learned to cope.

Tatum, 49, lost his wife to gall bladder cancer in Oct. 2011. Doctors gave her six months to live.

“Almost to the day, she lasted six months,” he said.

Opposites attract. Tatum’s wife was outgoing while he was more reserved. She encouraged him to become involved for the boys’ sake. A friend of Tatum’s referred him to Single Fathers Due to Cancer after seeing a commercial.

The support group helps fathers deal with the loss of their wife, meet the demands of sole parenthood and manage their children’s grief.

“I’m a big fan of our fathers. There is a lot to admire about them and how they have handled their own grief while shepherding their children through their grief; figuring out how to be a single parent or a sole dad as they like to call it,” said Dr. Justin Yopp,

assistant professor of psychiatry at UNC-Chapel Hill.

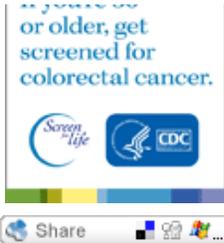
After having no one close to him who shared the same experiences, Tatum joined the group in Feb. 2011.

“I didn’t know what to expect,” he said. “I went in with an open mind.”

Dealing with guilt, stress, anxiety, fatherhood and questions – “Do I not miss my wife’s clothes?” “Do I still wear my wedding ring?”



If you're 50



get rid of my wife's clothes?" "Do I still wear my wedding ring?" "Who do I talk to?" – Tatum said "Single Fathers" keeps him grounded.

"Spending time with the gentlemen in the group has helped me to realize that a lot of things that I'm going through or will go through are normal," he said.

Time management was his biggest problem. Working as an electronic applications engineer with C&D Technologies, school, children and feelings, Tatum kept his sons in mind by being there for them emotionally.

"Now, I feel like I have more in line. Some of the challenges are still there. I think right now, I've got it under control," he said.

Tatum has created new traditions with his family. Every Christmas, they write a personal letter. On Mother's Day and on his wife's birthday, they visit her grave – bringing lunch and playing football.

"It was difficult the first time," he admitted.

To other grieving fathers who lost their spouse to cancer, Tatum says "It will probably be the largest obstacle that you will have to overcome. Different feelings, different anxieties that you've never felt before; in time, it does get better."

Yopp, along with Dr. Donald Rosenstein, also a professor in the department, are facilitators of the support group. They created the program to fill a void. Once their wives have passed, fathers are no longer connected to the hospital or hospice. Yopp and Rosenstein sought to reach out to this population.

While most support groups are for women, there is little clinical or research attention given to men.

"We can't make up what that is like. We need them to teach us, so we can help teach and reach other people," Yopp said.

The only requirement to join is the father must have a child that lost his mother to cancer. "That is the bond between all of the fathers," Yopp said.

Single Fathers currently has eight attendees. The group is able to open up with thoughts, feelings, experiences and provide support.

"That is something that men don't often have a chance to do," he added. "As much as we could teach them about grieving, what to look for in your child or things to consider when grieving, they really had more to offer for each other than we had to offer them."

Online resources can be found at www.singlefathersduetocancer.org. For more information on the program, send an email to singlefathersduetocancer@unc.edu or call (919) 445-5415.

Comments

Mr. Tatum seems like a great man and father. And its good to know we have this support group in our community.

Posted on February 20, 2013

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