

ROADWORTHY · THE STEADY DAD SERIES · No. 02

Grief with no funeral.

Your kids are alive and well and somewhere across town — and you're grieving them anyway. Nobody brings a casserole for this one. There's no service, no cards, no bloke at work who claps your shoulder and says sorry for your loss. This guide gives the thing you're carrying its proper name, explains why your brain can't put it down, and shows you how to carry it without it flattening you.

The loss that doesn't get a name

Psychologists call it ambiguous loss: grieving someone who is still living. It's recognised as one of the hardest kinds of loss a human being can process — harder, in some ways, than death — because it has no ending. When someone dies, the loss is terrible but it's closed: there's a funeral, a ritual, a community that acknowledges what happened and a grief with somewhere to go. When your kids are alive but out of reach, the loss stays open. They're at school right now. They're having birthdays. And you're grieving them in real time, with no ending to grieve toward.

There's a second layer, and it matters just as much. Researchers call it disenfranchised grief: grief the world doesn't recognise, so you're never given permission to feel it. Mates don't know what to say, so they say nothing. The system treats it as a legal matter, not a loss. Some people quietly assume you must have done something to deserve it. So you carry a full sized grief with none of the support that normally comes with one — and then wonder why you're not coping the way you think you should.

Why your brain can't close the file

Your brain treats an unresolved loss the way it treats any unsolved problem: it keeps the case open. That's why it loops at 2am. That's why a school photo or an empty seat at the footy can drop you without warning months after you thought you'd adjusted. This isn't weakness and it isn't failure to move on — it's a healthy brain doing exactly what brains do with open loops: returning to them, searching for a resolution that the situation doesn't offer. Once you understand that, the 2am replays stop being evidence that you're broken and start being what they actually are: a warning light telling you the engine is working hard on a problem it can't solve alone.

Men in this position often describe the moment someone finally names this as pure relief. Research with parents cut off from their children finds the same thing: being told what ambiguous loss is, and that their reactions are the expected human response to it, is itself one of the most powerful interventions available. You're not going mad. You're grieving in a situation that gives grief nowhere to go.

What grief looks like in blokes

Grief in men often doesn't look like sadness. It wears work clothes. It looks like a shorter fuse, longer hours, another beer, the shed, the group chat you stopped answering, the flatness where the fire used to be. If you've been angrier, quieter, or more checked out than usual, you may not have an anger

problem or a motivation problem — you may have a grief that's never been allowed to be one. Naming the real feeling matters, because the research is clear that accurately identifying what you're actually feeling measurably settles the brain's threat response. That's grief, not rage is a sentence that does real work.

THE ROADWORTHY POSITION

Carrying this well doesn't mean getting over it. It means grieving and functioning — both at once, some days badly, most days well enough. The load doesn't get lighter. You get stronger under it, and the still standing check on the last page is how you keep an honest eye on yourself while you do.

Carrying it without it flattening you

Give it a regular appointment. Grief that's allowed some room takes less by force. Ten minutes, a few times a week — the drive, the shed, a walk — where you let it be what it is instead of pushing it down. Scheduled grief sounds strange until you notice the 2am ambushes easing.

Keep one thread of connection alive, whatever the situation allows. Letters written and kept, a journal addressed to your kids, the birthday card sent every year regardless. This isn't sentimental — it keeps your identity as their dad active and present tense, and it builds the record your adult children may one day read.

Stay a whole person. The matter will try to become your entire identity. Don't let it. The mates, the work, the training, the things you were before — they aren't distractions from the grief, they're the structure that lets you carry it. A man who is only his court case has nowhere to stand.

Tell one person the truth. Not the whole story — just the true sentence: I'm grieving my kids and it's heavy this week. Disenfranchised grief loses half its weight the first time someone hears it and doesn't flinch.

When it's more than grief

Grief and depression overlap, and in this situation both are understandable — but they're not the same and they're not both jobs you should carry alone. If the flatness has stopped lifting at all, if nothing reaches you, or if the thought that everyone would be better off without you has started visiting, that's not a light on the dash anymore — that's the engine asking for a mechanic. Talk to your GP, or call MensLine (1300 78 99 78) or Dads in Distress through Parents Beyond Breakup (1300 853 437), any time. Reaching out is a service, not a surrender.

Roadworthy provides psychoeducation, mentoring and community grounded in positive behaviour support and psychology research on Australian men. This resource is general information, not clinical treatment or legal advice. If things are heavy right now: MensLine Australia 1300 78 99 78 or Lifeline 13 11 14, any hour. If anyone is in immediate danger, call 000. Support for anyone affected by family violence: 1800RESPECT (1800 737 732).

ROADWORTHY · THE STEADY DAD SERIES · TOOL

Still standing – the weekly self check.

Two minutes, once a week, same day each week. Rate each warning light honestly, then choose one action – just one. The point isn't a perfect dashboard; it's an honest one, checked regularly, acted on early. Print a stack and keep them somewhere you'll see them.

WARNING LIGHT	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE	STEADY	FLICKER	ON	REDLINE
Short fuse	Small things landing like provocation – traffic, noise, the checkout.				
Running on empty	Flat, not tired. Can't be bothered with things you used to enjoy.				
Overheating	Body tense all day – jaw, shoulders, chest. Sleep broken by racing thoughts.				
Withdrawing	Dodging mates, off the group chat, going through the motions.				
The heavy days	Grief sitting on your chest. Hopeless thoughts getting louder or more frequent.				

This week's one action

Pick one, tick it, do it. ☐ Ten minutes of scheduled grief ☐ Tell one person the true sentence ☐ One letter or journal entry to the kids ☐ Train or walk, three times ☐ Protect sleep (phone out of the room) ☐ Call a mate I've been dodging ☐ Book the GP

WEEK OF: _____ NOTES: _____

The rule of two. Any light at ON for two weeks running, or REDLINE once – especially the heavy days – means the check has done its job: act now, while acting is easy. Tell someone, book the GP, or call MensLine 1300 78 99 78. That's not the wheels falling off. That's a roadworthy man reading his dash and pulling in for the service.

If hopeless thoughts are strong or you have thoughts of ending your life, don't wait for the weekly check – call Lifeline 13 11 14 or 000 now.