Dads in Distress Submission To The Senate Select Committee on Men's Health.

Submission by DADS IN DISTRESS INC
to
Senate Select Committee on Men's Health 4.3.2009

Senate Select Committee on Men's Health, Department of the Senate PO Box 6100, Parliament House, Canberra ACT 2600 Australia

Dads in distress are a dedicated support group for men whose immediate concern is to stem the present trend of male suicide due to the trauma of divorce or separation. We welcome the Senate Select Committee Inquiry into the state of Men's Health and bring to it effects and outcomes from a separated or divorced male's perspective. Almost half our male population are either experiencing this or are effected in some way or form.

The Dads in Distress organisation submit the following:

Men and Suicide

Men need to know it's ok to share their feelings, it's ok to seek help…
Tony Miller, DIDS Founder

Current research indicates that Australian males make the decision to take their own life very quickly, showing few warning signs. For this reason, is it essential to have support systems readily available to respond quickly and effectively to any possible warning signs or immediate cries for help.

Although men of all ages, backgrounds and nationalities can be at risk, the ABS statistics describe men at particular risk as being:

- young or middle aged (20 to 44 years) or older men (over 75);
- men living in rural or remote areas;
- men undergoing traumatic life events (including relationship breakdown, separation from children, unemployment, financial stress and social isolation);
- men in prison or custody;
- men from Indigenous communities[i][i].

Suicide accounts for approximately one quarter of all deaths among Australian men between the ages of 20 and 44 years and life events such as unemployment, financial difficulties, relationship problems, depression, work stress, and substance abuse all play a role in determining the risk of suicide in this age group.

If there was ever a rock bottom in my life it was the divorce, the family court, the solicitors and most of all, the loss of my children…
DIDS volunteer

A number of reasons for the relatively high rate of suicide in men have been suggested in the literature and these include:

- an increased likelihood to choose methods resulting in instant death
- a tendency to ignore or not recognise negative emotions or distress that lead to more severe emotional responses to adverse life events[ii][ii]
- reluctance to seek help for emotional difficulties or communicate feelings of despair or hopelessness to others[iii][iii]
- a belief that help-seeking displays weakness or failure[iv][iv]
- lack of awareness of available local support services or a feeling that these services would not help in their situation.

While it is generally agreed that suicide-related behaviours can be linked to combinations of life events and personal and social factors; there is a growing body of evidence suggesting that one or more adverse life events, such as family breakdown, often precede suicide attempts.

It has been suggested that separated men commit suicide at six times the rate of married men and that divorce multiplies men's suicide risk, making them nearly 9.7 times likelier than women to commit suicide even after consideration of other risk factors[v][v].

Although it is not implicit in this research that all of these separated/divorced men commit suicide primarily due to the compounding factors of their separation or divorce, what can be generally assumed from the research is that the stress of adverse life events such as separation or divorce - reduced contact with children, difficult relationships with family members, financial overburden and so forth; all have the potential to significantly contribute to a man's feelings of hopelessness or an inability to cope.

Anecdotal evidence gathered from DIDS Support Group members and Volunteer Facilitators indicates that men who turn to DIDS for support do so from a place of intense personal suffering, compounded by feelings that there are no alternatives or choices available to them. Many have said that it is only because of DIDS that they are still here for their children today.

"DIDS is there for us men as we go through the worst time in our lives…"
Separated dad, NSW

The major challenges for many DIDS members experiencing relationship breakdown involve not only the loss of contact with their children, but the persistent financial and legal burdens that go hand in hand with displacement from the family home and negotiations for settlements and custody/access to their children.

The burden of legal advisors; court fees; finding a new place to live; replacing furniture and everyday living items; and doubling up on school uniforms, toys and children's clothing is a financial stress that fathers must bear, on top of paying child support and meeting everyday living expenses such as food, fuel and rent.

The legal burdens which follow - preparing affidavits and Orders applications; responding to Orders and letters from lawyers; negotiating property settlement offers and so forth, all place a father in a very challenging position. Often, paying for legal assistance takes the majority of a father's income or savings, with little guarantee of equality of outcome or a promise to see or have regular care of their children in the end. Case-studies from DIDS members indicate that a father of 4 can lose 75-85% or more of the marital assets to the mother of his children, while being asked to pay at least 36% of his taxable income in child support. With the burden of Federal government taxes of at least 32%, this leaves the average working father little to set up a new life for himself and his children. Feelings of despair, desperation and an inability to cope follow; often compounded by social isolation, lack of family or peer support and the ever-present mountain of bills and expenses that still need to be paid even though the world is falling down around them.
For many of the men who reach out to DIDS for support, this is the reality they face and the blackness from which many feel there is no escape.

Fast Facts

- Australian Government findings from a review of the LIFE (Living Is For Everyone) Framework for Suicide Prevention indicate that more than two thousand Australians take their own lives every year. In 2005, Australian males accounted for approximately 80% of all suicide deaths.[vi][vi]
- While Australian research indicates that age standardised rates for suicide have been decreasing slowly since 1997, indications are that females attempt suicide at a higher rate than that of males, but males are four times more likely to complete suicide than females.
- Data from the recently released ABS 'Causes of Death' publication[vii][vii] indicate that in 2006:
  - there were 1 799 registered deaths from suicide compared to 2 101 in the previous year
  - males accounted for 78% of deaths by suicide (1,398 males) and females accounted for 22% of deaths by suicide (401 females)
  - the highest number of suicide deaths for males was observed in the 35 to 39 and 45 to 49 age groups, followed by males aged 40 to 44 years
  - The percentage of deaths due to suicide in relation to the total number of deaths from all causes differs greatly among some age groups and between males and females. In particular, in the 20 to 24 year age group in 2006, suicide accounted for approximately 21% of all male deaths; and 14% of all female deaths for the 20 to 24 year age group. It also accounted for 19% of all male deaths and 12% of female deaths for the 25 to 29 year age group.
- Earlier studies directed at the relationship between marital status and suicide have also indicated significant differences in rates for married and separated persons[viii][viii]; while more recent studies focussing on suicide and geographic location also indicate a notable difference between urban-rural suicide rates, particularly among marginalised groups such as Indigenous communities and disadvantaged males[ix][ix].
- Australian suicide rates in rural and remote communities have risen substantially over the past few decades, especially among men[x][x] [xi][xi]:

Recommendations:

The Dads in Distress organisation believes there needs to be made available, funding for appropriate research into male suicide especially around divorce and or separation and that Government adequately funds groups that provide suicide prevention or intervention programs. Suicide in this country especially male suicide is at epidemic levels. Suicide is suicide it matters little be it male or female, it is still a tragedy. All agencies including ours need help to cope. With the economic crisis, families are only going to come under more pressure. And while the Family Law Court looks the other way when it comes to enforcing its own orders in custody disputes the outlook is glum for divorced and separated men. Relationship breakdown, separation, divorce and denial of contact with one's own children is one of the primary drivers of depression, social isolation and suicide in males in the western culture. Although the Government has announced a Men's Health Policy, nothing seems to be forthcoming in strengthening those services that have been doing the work for years.

We would also recommend that a department for “Men and their Children” be established to research, collate and distribute information that directly relates to the health of men and their children to Government and back to service providers and the public. This department could become a “clearing house” as such, to collate, collect and disseminate funding relating to men and their children to appropriate programs, a peak body if you like.

We recommend there be a more integrated approach amongst agencies focussing on early intervention rather then the current concept of ‘waiting till the horse has bolted,’ could and would, greatly reduce the harm inflicted on men and their children.

We ask that the current Government funded Domestic Violence campaign refocusses the campaign to educate the public that domestic violence is non gender specific. It affects everyone especially our children. The current deficit male model campaign does little to engender a positive outcome from males and rather further denigrates the majority who are doing the right thing. A more balanced equitable approach would do much in lifting the psyche of the majority of males who at present feel disenfranchised from society by means of divorce or separation.

We also ask that refuges or crisis accommodation be established for men and their children in the early stages of divorce or separation, and who are uprooted from the family home. Many men and their children revert to unsuitable housing simply because they do not have the means whilst experiencing the early stages of divorce or separation. Again this is a primary driver which affects the health and wellbeing of the divorced or separated male.

And finally we ask that the Government commit adequate funds to enable the Contact Centre's and Family Relationship Centre's to enhance their service delivery. Waiting times in some Contact Centres and at the time of writing can be as much as 8 months. When males (Fathers) are confronted with the scenario of not seeing their children for this length of time, the on flow of emotional unrest, depression and suicidal thought patterns are imminent. Not only does the delay affect our men's health, but the time l ag equally affects our children's health. Again, *denial of contact with one's own children is one of the primary drivers of depression, social isolation and suicide in males in the western culture.*

The Dads In Distress organisation would like to thank the Senators in pursuing the interests of Men's Health in Australia……. Tony Miller Founder Dads in Distress INC

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