

## THE DISENFRANCHISED FATHER SYNDROME

Gerald L. Rowles, Ph.D.

### PREFACE:

About 30 years ago, Holmes and Rahe published the Social Readjustment Rating Scale which ranked life events as to their stress factor on a scale of 1-100. The number 1 rank was "death of a spouse" (death of a child might be presumed as very nearly equivalent) at 100, followed in 2nd place by Divorce (73) 3rd place, Marital Separation (65) then; Changes in financial state (38) Change in Living Conditions (25) Change in residence (20). Compare these with: Christmas (12); Minor violations of law (11).

For a divorced dad, that's a stress value of 221 pts (plus the loss of the children) out of the starting gate. Over time, those events may be compounded and reiterated with each court trip and/or visitation sabotage. All too frequently, we must also factor in the devastating effect of false allegations of abuse.

Other research findings from the Holmes and Rahe scale:

The more life events one experiences, the more likely they are to get sick. Individuals who have heart attacks had more significant life events in the six months prior to the attack.

Individuals who became depressed had a larger number of life events, particularly losses, than those who did not.

The gradual chipping away at an individual by stresses that wear him or her down leads to susceptibility & precipitates dramatic jumps in illness.

What distinguishes hospitalized groups from the non-hospitalized is the number of "uncontrollable" life events in the proceeding year - "helplessness-inducing" life events.

This is the key variable - "uncontrollable". To the degree that a dad is involved in an adversarial divorce, the number and frequency of the accompanying stressful life-events and the impact of the repeated experience of helplessness is virtually inestimable in terms of describing what may be an exponential experience of distress.

That some men are virtually or partially immobilized by emotional pain that is bound up in a closed system, comes as no foreign notion to me, both as a function of my research experience and of that experience outlined in the comments that follow.

But there is more to the Divorced Dads issue than emotional distress, as Maggie Gallagher has so aptly articulated in the linked column. I would point particularly to the stats that indicate that an average of 56% of white males, whether divorced or single, make less than \$18,000 per year - or about \$8.00 per hour. The post-divorce schedule posted elsewhere on the DA\*DI pages demonstrates how vulnerable these men are to the potential for becoming "deadbeat dads" when the court follows the "standard" award for child support.

#### DISENFRANCHISED FATHERS:

In my experience working with more than 3000 divorced Fathers, and in some cases their second families, through the DA\*DI network, I originally outlined what I then called the Defeated Father Syndrome. In listening to their personal experiences and emotional responses to the experience of divorce and the attendant loss of their child or children, these Fathers almost universally shared a symptom cluster that bridged those symptoms associated with both Depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Their depression derived from loss of positive reinforcers, a sense of helplessness, and a growing negative worldview. Their PTSD derived from the battleground of the adversarial family court system in which they repeatedly found themselves on the losing end of a losing proposition - attempting to maintain their roles as Fathers. It is not hyperbole to associate this experience with the battleground. A 1995 headline in the Detroit News blared: "Declaring War on America's Deadbeat Dads". The war is real, as are its casualties - children and fathers, but the "deadbeat dad" is largely fictional.

Recently, Dr. Sanford Braver published the results of his exhaustive 8-year study of divorce. And in that account, he not only "shatters" the many myths surrounding America's divorced dads, but he also explores the notion of the disenfranchised dad. In a glaring refutation of cultural perception, Dr. Braver found that "men have more trouble recovering emotionally" from divorce. He notes that "most often the man - feels utterly powerless because he can do nothing to prevent the breakup of the marriage." This is entirely consistent with my experience in dealing with the DA\*DI dads. Hence, I attached the label Defeated. But this is an outcome-based label. It fails to encompass the whole of the divorced, battle weary father experience and what precipitates that sense of defeat.

Dr. Braver much more adequately captures the precipitating event in using the label Disenfranchised. He reports, "Fathers are often obsessed with what they perceive as the profound bias against them displayed by the courts and the legal system." And the fact is that such a bias does exist, including the presumption that all divorced dads are deadbeat dads.

Expanding on Dr. Braver's findings, Parke and Brott in *Throwaway Dads* takes

us another step closer to understanding the degree to which the contemporary myth of the unfeeling, macho, uninvolved, "deadbeat", if not "dangerous" dad belies the frequent, tragic-reality of the post-divorce, disenfranchised, "visiting father." To their credit, Parke and Brott take note of the fact that "hammering men over the head" with their "wildly exaggerated ... shortcomings only fills them with feelings of shame that serve to drive them further from their families" ... and developing a sense of "being worthless and powerless."

The definition of disenfranchised is "to deprive of political rights", "to enslave", "to deprive of a franchise, of a legal right, or of some privilege or immunity". Such is the process of becoming a divorced dad - a disenfranchised parent. These definitions are becoming even more relevant as the Child Support Enforcement statutes become more egregious - e.g., depriving Fathers of their licenses to drive or practice their professions.

The following stressors are common in Fathers who have been exposed to divorce and the deeply painful loss of marital attachment and daily involvement in their child(ren)'s life:

the psychological shock of discovering that one's spouse has filed for divorce.

The initial exposure to the prospect of divorce, and the attendant losses including financial and lifestyle stability.

The extreme trauma of being compelled to psychologically separate from the marital relationship while simultaneously maintaining the parenting role.

The perceptual transition of the object of one's affection to one's adversary.

The perception of betrayal.

The emotional trauma of establishing a new home and alternate lifestyle.

The added economic hardship of legal proceedings and separate domicile.

The associated and unrelenting punitive experience of the family court system when attempting to maintain some form of parental involvement in an adversarial divorce.

The shame and indignation surrounding false allegations of abuse.  
The immediate separation from their children.

The extended separation from their children.

Repeated defeats in legal actions.

Repeated accusations and investigations of alleged abuse.

Repeated denial of court-ordered parenting time.

Sabotage of the Father-child nurturance relationship by the custodial mother.

The perceived or real ineffectiveness of legal representation.

The increasing perception of distance in shared emotional and life experiences with one's child(ren) - a growing sense of separateness.

An increasingly punitive association between the attachment to their child(ren) and the hostility or indifference of an adversarial spouse.

Emotional and physical exhaustion from frustrated attempts to sustain a Father role.

The increasing realization that a Father has no legal rights in the family court system.

Most Fathers who become non-custodial parents struggle on valiantly for several years after the epoch event, attempting to maintain some kind of normalcy in their relationship with their offspring. But they gradually, and realistically, come to realize that what is lost is greater than what is preserved. They increasingly feel helpless to have a prominent influence in their child(ren)'s lives. Consequently, in many cases the motivation for career success is significantly diminished.

To the degree that the non-custodial Father was involved in his child(ren)'s daily activities, and played an active and nurturing parenting role, the levels of stress will be concomitantly exacerbated.

Almost immediately, however, the stressors listed above begin to form symptom clusters that are most often associated with the following clinical syndromes. Because of the singular and shared association with the trauma of divorce and the loss of the Fatherhood role, as well as the frequency of occurrence, a separate diagnostic entity is warranted - the Disenfranchised Father Syndrome:

**DEPRESSION**

Symptoms:

Significant Appetite and/or Weight Change.  
Sleep Change: Too Little or Too Much.

Agitation or Lethargy.

Loss of Interest or Pleasure in Usual Activities.

Decrease in Sexual Drive.

Loss of Energy; Fatigue.

Feelings of Worthlessness or Inappropriate Guilt.

Slowed Thinking; Indecisiveness; Poor Concentration.

Recurrent Thoughts of Death, Suicide, Wishes to be Dead.

Diagnosis of either disorder requires the presence of only four symptoms.  
P.T.S.D. (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder)  
Symptoms:

Presence of a Significant Stress Event.

Recurrent, Intrusive Recollection of the Event.

Recurrent dreams of the Event.  
Sudden Feelings that the Event is Recurring.

Numbing of Involvement with the External World.

Markedly Diminished Interest in Significant Activities.

Feelings of Detachment/Estrangement from Others.

Exaggerated Startle Response;  
Hyperalertness.

Sleep Disturbance.

Irrational Guilt.

Memory/Concentration Impairment.  
Avoidance of Activities that Arouse  
Memories of the Event.

Intensification of the Above Signs by  
Exposure to Events that Symbolize the  
Traumatic Event.

### FIRST, THERAPY CAN HELP AVOID CHRONIC DISTRESS

How do we defend Fathers against the relentless societal juggernaut that drives them into becoming portrayed as psuedo-felons and fictitious-deadbeats? We must first accept the fact that the historic male caricature of the strong, unfeeling and impervious patriarch is a myth in today's society. Many divorced Fathers are the battle-weary casualties of a culture that no longer finds value in Fatherhood, and a court system that is engaged in the self-fulfilling prophecy that they will become deadbeats.

We must acknowledge that men can be weakened, and that they frequently become disabled by the same emotional bonds that they have been enculturated to develop with their children - before becoming divorced and disenfranchised.

Mental Illness, such as PTSD and/or Depression is disabling, displaying a continuum of severity that substantially limits one or more of a Disenfranchised Father's major life activities.

One way or another, dads experiencing several of the symptoms of the Disenfranchised Father Syndrome should seek out a receptive therapist who will not unnecessarily add to the blame game. But learning to expose the thought patterns that maintain the dysphoria, and finding out about old feelings that have grown callouses leading to rigidity is important, whether it be in groups or one-to-one sessions.

Conclusions:

As the nationally syndicated columnist Kathleen Parker has so aptly surmised,

"The solution to deadbeat dads isn't criminalizing fathers, but allowing them to be part of their children's lives. Tonight, in a nation

where fatherlessness is recognized as one of our most serious social problems, 42 percent of all children will sleep in a house where their biological father does NOT live. ... The wonder isn't that we have deadbeat dads, but that we don't have more."

I would suggest that today's Disenfranchised Father is in many, if not most cases, exhibiting an emotional disability deriving from the divorce experience that substantially limits one or more of his major life activities. I would further suggest that evidence of that disability, other than psychological tests for disordered mood, comes directly from a sketchy work history, and/or the inability to function at optimal employment capacity.

It may very well be that Fathers who have been imprisoned for failure to meet egregious support provisions, may in fact be imprisoned for emotional disability - the Disenfranchised Father Syndrome - a self-fulfilling by-product of a profoundly biased legal system. In the medical and psychiatric professions, when the administered treatment inadvertently produces a negative impact on the patient's well-being, it is known as an iatrogenic illness.

In the case of Divorced Dads, I don't believe that there is anything inadvertent about this sometimes profoundly disabling iatrogenic outcome. Rather, it is a disingenuously deliberate and biased, misapplication of the full power of the State. We must resolve to restore equity, and the Fatherhood franchise - for the health of our Dads, for the health of our Kids, and for the future health of our Culture.