

Honouring acts of care of children to others

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One thing that has really stood out to me in speaking with mothers and more recently with young people and families who have lost a loved one to suicide are the ways in which young people engage in care practices that are both tender and skilful in a multiplicity of ways. This is often not acknowledged and at worst pathologised. Here is an extract from my thesis in which mothers conveyed how significant it had been to them to experience acts of care from their children (after their male partners had ended their lives).

Children reassuring mothers

This has been a big theme in my life, and I was so touched that it was true for many of the women. Children found many ways to comfort their mothers and provide rest: providing cups of tea, cleaning the house and letting mum sleep in. I have tender memories of my children comforting me with hugs and brushing my hair. My children have helped me a lot with this. When I have told them that I wished I had 'done more' to keep their dad alive, they have been very clear that I did all that I could do.

Women in this research shared many endearing stories about how their children had reminded them of their strengths as mothers. A mother tenderly said,

I don't think I've done anything more than any other mother would have, but I suppose my children look at the relationship that my husband and I had and the way I talk about him, and it breaks their heart that I don't have him still with me. I think in reflecting on how I have done since the death, they would say, 'you could have crumbled, but you didn't. I do not know how you've stayed so strong and maintained your job, and your golf and your friendships, all the while being heartbroken'.

Children could help alleviate the pain of their mothers. One woman said:

There have been times when we used to go to the cemetery all together, and there was one time I said, 'oh I just wish Dad was here ... I wish I had just not gone to work that day'. And my son said to me, 'Mum, if it hadn't been that day, it would have been another day, you know that ... Dad was on a journey that wasn't to old age; it was just to when it got too much'. And I know that.

I wanted to end with children's wisdoms as seen through the eyes of their mothers:

Dad would be proud of how you raised us.

You have done your best, Mum.

We will take care of you when you are old.