Men’s emotional experiences of caring: How men do emotion and implications for emotional support

Supervisors

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Defining the problem

- Growing number of male carers, over half of all carers over 65 in Australia are men (ABS, 2008)
- Caring is known to be detrimental to the health of carers (ABS, 2008; AIHW, 2004; AIHW, 2012)
- Emotional support is known to mitigate the health risks associated with caring but men are poor users of such services (Alzheimer’s Australia, 2005; Carers NSW, 2005)
- There is limited understanding of men’s emotional experiences of caring.
Semi-structured interviews with 10 men; 60+ years retired/semi-retired, primary carers for their wives who have been diagnosed with dementia.

6 of the men also participated in a second stage using cameras to document their emotional experiences of caring followed by a 2nd interview.

Emerging findings show that how men express emotion is contingent upon both socio-cultural structures and the individual contexts of men’s everyday lives and this has implications for providing emotional support to male carers.
Some men articulate emotion

Keeping it to myself

“That I must admit is how I feel often. That I’m sort of bunkered down and thinking, “Well, this is the way it is, so let’s duck out of the wind….. and ducking very largely into myself. One of the nice things is that I can sit here and talk to you on the phone and say those things. If I said that in front of Louise she would get so upset because of what she perceives she is doing to me.” Simon 74 years
There’s an actual picnic spot there. The beauty of it is it’s not very well known about so we could go there and it was like having your own little park.”

“…actually it gave me a real chill taking this picture because I hadn’t been there since I’d been there with Olivia. It was the first time I’d been and I just felt so lonely, I really did. It was awful. I thought I’m not coming back. It was, it was terrible …..and I couldn’t stomach it. I thought no I can’t go back. That was a hard day taking that one” Andrew 82
Grief

“I often become quite emotional and shed tears as I tell her how much she means to me as my best friend and wife. The grief comes in waves and sometimes you can cope quite well and duck under the waves and other times the wave slaps you in the face and you struggle to know where you are and what is happening. There is a break from the wave and you compose yourself and keep going. There are times when the waves are gentle and you continue life normally but there are times when the waves are turbulent and toss you too and throw and you wonder if you can cope with the next set of waves.” Oliver 70 years

Grief is like the waves rolling in from the ocean.
Anxiety & Uncertainty

“Louise and I had all these plans, we hadn’t finished travelling, but we think we have now… there’s a wonderful road sign there called Mayday Road… Well I’m hoping that although it’s looking a bit rusty, I’m hoping that we’re not really at Mayday yet.”

“It’s one of those illnesses that – well you know what’s around the corner, but you don’t know how far it is around the corner….I was looking for something that sort of said that I don’t know what the future brings.”

Simon 74
Communicating emotion in and through action

Sometimes I hide my feelings

Addressing the myth: Men are emotionally inexpressive/instrumental


Some men’s emotions in accordance with an embodied approach are communicated through deeds “and these deeds embody their emotionality in all their complexity” p160

“I suppose that my problem is that I was brought up in an era when men face problems with a stiff upper lip, big boys don’t cry that type of thing. And sometimes I feel like crying but I don’t.” Simon 74
Affective care in action and doing:

“Really she can brush her hair but she can’t do it properly. If I am going out, I have to set it up and comb it and put a bit of a spray on it to hold it in place.” Will 73

“…she can still tell the time – 10 o’clock is when they pick her up. And she can still recognise the time, so we just say, “What time is it on the clock?” Because she gets very agitated waiting for them” Jason mid 70s

“This is the office where my business happens. It’s here I make the money to pay for {the nursing home} so Alison is well cared for” Jack 86
Support from other men is understood as in action and doing

“David comes around regularly. He’s turned up - he’s rung our son in law and said “Bring your mower, your dad’s grass needs mowing”. So they’ll turn up with the mowers” Chris 72 years

“...number two son, he… comes up about once every two weeks. And we take her out to lunch and a drive around..... I can only do it with somebody else, because I’m on a stick, so if she starts wandering off there’s no way I can keep up with her” Jack 86 years

“Support groups are only good if people will participate. And it evolves… I don’t mean to be disrespectful, for a lot of like more traditional where people just come in and blur in the same old story and rehashing it. We don’t want that. We don’t need it. You know, if they want to go and get some counselling private that is fine. But we are discussing day-to-day activities and what is going on with us at that very moment, and so you know everyone bounces off each other for ideas” Sam 60 years
In summary:

Two ends of a spectrum

Middle class and educated. Worked and or socialised in environments where the emotional communication is valued, e.g. Female dominated environments.

Low SES or originate from low SES, less educated Worked and or socialised in environments where emotional expression is not valued e.g. Male dominated environments

Have emotional language. More likely to use services which rely on emotional disclosure

Emotion expressed in action and doing. Resist support requiring emotional disclosure
Conclusion & Implications for Carer Support Services

Men’s emotional experiences of caring are heterogeneous

Emotional expression in men is contingent upon socio–cultural influences (e.g. class, gender and age) coupled with the individual contexts of men’s everyday lives.

Current models of emotional support need to better reflect the diversity of men’s emotional experiences and social locations and guard against a one size fits all approach.

It is likely that the most vulnerable men are those not currently being reached by services because emotional disclosure is an issue for these men.

“Finding space with male peers specifically without the need for personal sharing …can create a safe, enjoyable emotionally relaxed (rather than emotionally bereft) environment for men” (Robertson & Monaghan, 2012, p.160)
References


Carers NSW. (2005). *The social and emotional circumstances of male carers*. Sydney: Carers NSW.
