

EMPTY NEST

It's rarely talked about, but men can feel the gut-wrenching ache of childlessness as strongly as women. *Robert Nurden* is one such man.

Women without children generally get a raw deal. If their situation is involuntary, they are portrayed as pitiable; if it's a choice, they're seen as selfish. But what about the guys? How do we deal with a state that is so out of our control? And how do we support and comfort someone in that position, especially if we have someone to call us 'Dad'?

It's no surprise that the issue of unwanted childlessness is almost always seen through the eyes of women. After all, they are exclusively responsible for childbirth and the greater part of early years' care. But men often long to have children of their own too, and the resulting hurt when life doesn't bring them the family they craved can hit just as hard.

In these extracts from Robert's book, *I Always Wanted To Be A Dad: Men Without Children*, we will see the anger and despair of being childless by circumstance

Sometimes the fault lies with the individual's poor choices; sometimes it's just bad luck, poor timing or ill judgement. Or sometimes it's infertility, or a complex combination of factors beyond the man's control. Whatever the cause, these men can feel their lives have gone wrong.

THE TRAIN

They got on at West Ham station and sat opposite me. I'd started my journey on the Jubilee Line at Stratford and was going into central London to see some exhibition; I forget what it was.



They were a happy Saturday morning family: Mum, Dad, two kids, about 10 and eight. Where were they going? The Science Museum? Madame Tussauds? The Changing of the Guard? McDonald's?

It was a weekend scene: a flurry of activity, the snatching back of mobile phones, the pulling of faces, the admonitory glances from a parent when they thought one of the kids had transgressed Tube train etiquette.

It was a display of anarchic freedom acted out in the calm waters of confident

parental love. It was playing up, but within boundaries. Boundaries which everyone was familiar with. My partner and I were drawn into this exhibition of generational jousting. We glanced at each other and smiled. The smile stayed on our lips as we looked across the gangway at the mother. She acknowledged us and produced a faint, watery grin.

The train entered the tunnel just after Canning Town and then the magic broke. Something in me snapped. What I had →



been watching was no longer an enchanting performance. Now all I could see was a family of four. And all I could feel was a knife plunged into my ribs. I felt sick, leaned forward and clenched my teeth. One arm lifted without purpose and fell again into my lap. I stared at the advertisements. One was for online dating. Another for hair gel. A third asked customers to continue to wear a face mask.

'Are you OK?' my partner asked.

'Sorry, I can't take this anymore. I've got to move.'

She sighed. 'Not again? You did this last week.'

'I know. I can't help it.'

'Don't you think it's time you accepted the fact that every time you travel on the Tube you're going to see families?'

'Yes, of course it's time.' I sarcastically echoed her choice of words. I got up and walked down the carriage, leaving it up to her whether she followed or stayed put. Luckily, she followed me. And I never saw that family again.

I was breathing heavily. My heart was beating hard. Beads of sweat had broken out on my brow. I sat down in an empty seat and she joined me, taking my hand and squeezing it. She leaned across and kissed me on the lips. God, I was lucky to have her.

'Sorry, but I just can't stand it. Staring me in the face like that, mocking me for all that I haven't achieved.'

THE CUTE AND THE CRUEL

Men who are childless not by choice learn to recognise the warning signs that can get thrown up by certain life events. These triggers of negative feelings invariably emanate from the most normal and common occurrences that have little impact on other people, certainly not a negative one. Some of these are visual, some verbal and others circumstantial.

One of the tropes that frequently crops up is the image of the 'perfect family' seen in public places. So, a trigger can be activated by spotting children playing in the park, particularly if their father is with them. Dad walking his children to school is another that can bring pangs of envy. Quite apart from the never-ending images of the happy nuclear family promoted by advertising; itself an unacknowledged mouthpiece of pronatalism.

Mother's Day and Father's Day are two other public events, albeit ones that are largely recent commercial creations, that can act as triggers. Pretending to be happy when one's partner's children arrive at the house with flowers and presents for their mother can stretch cordiality to its limits. And it can last the whole day and beyond, particularly if they chat about the past and then move onto the present-day and talk about their own kids – and her



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grandchildren. The polarities are a yawning gulf between the cute and the cruel.

That happened to me recently and the stress of that experience triggered a health event – my blood pressure soared, I had an attack of amnesia and was taken to A&E. The episode lasted several hours. More broadly, this phenomenon undoubtedly has physical manifestations. A common feature of the trigger is a short, dull ache in the chest, which I find can be controlled and eventually dissipated by taking a series of deep breaths.

Father's Day can have similar connotations. I remember going for what I

thought would be a quiet walk alone along the river. Except that I kept on meeting families led by a proud father laughing and joking with his sons and daughters on his special day. But, there again, I could have been wrong. Appearances can be deceptive. That father may not have been the biological father and could have been an adoptive parent, a stepfather or a foster carer. And while a family you see in public may look 'perfect' from the outside there can be all sorts of issues going on behind closed doors. The childless man's reactions can be triggered by his own imagination, assumptions and insecurities around

parenthood as much as reality. Clearly, someone who is childless not by choice must tread carefully. There are many pitfalls.

Conversations at work is another danger area. All it takes is for colleagues to start chatting about their children and what they did at the weekend and the man who is childless suddenly finds he has an invisible sticking plaster slapped over his mouth. Listening to milestones, achievements and success stories of fertility treatments or high-risk pregnancies is on the list, too, of course. Especially when those happy events have come after years of the couple in question trying to conceive and when one's own experience has been a failure.

It would be wrong to give the idea that when such events are a source of stress for the childless man that he always turns into a mute punchbag of hurt. Don't doubt that there can be a backlash when the pain morphs into anger and even gloating and glee when seemingly happy families experience

setbacks. I hate to say this but, hearing about the stresses and downsides of having children, and even the expense, can act as an antidote, too. This is not a pretty business.

One friend of mine says the worst trigger is when you tell a stranger that you don't have children and they respond with: 'You're lucky'. 'Don't they realise anything?' asks my friend.

The range of events that can have this effect is wide and long. Nor is one necessarily safe within the confines of one's family. Just seeing one's nephew going off to college or a niece talking about her first boyfriend can be enough. You can get plunged into the depths just by seeing your own parents spending time with their grandchildren or just talking about them, knowing that you can add nothing to the conversation.

Yet with the pain can also come some relief, even though it is double-edged. As one friend told me: 'Watching my nieces

CHILDLESS VOICES

KEN

About three years ago not being a father really hit me, big time. A guy I work with told me his wife was pregnant and that the doctors were a little concerned because of her age: 45. The next day, all of a sudden it hit me like a ton of bricks about never having children. Never being a father. Never holding my new-born. No one to nurture. When my wife and I realised it was never going to happen, I went into deep depression. I was angry. I yelled. I yelled at my wife telling her she or anyone with kids will never understand what it's like. Ever since then every day has been a struggle. I see reminders, triggers every day in real life situations: at work, going to the store, on TV, everywhere. I never will have kids. Oh, just to add, the guy from work and his wife had the baby with no issues or problems. Good for them.

GRAHAM

I'm in a monthly curry club – four to five blokes meeting up for a curry and a beer. 70 per cent of the conversation is about their family life, kids and all the dramas that go with that. I'm the only one without. I don't think for one minute they consider how I feel. I'm just childless Graham.

TREVOR

I have felt broody in the past and sometimes I still do, although I know it's almost definitely too late now. Besides, with all the dangers around late fatherhood, I wouldn't want to take the risk. It's so frustrating because I know it would have been possible if I'd taken different decisions. As a man, I've missed out on one of life's great events: being a father.

RUSS

I still feel the discomfort but the breakthrough came when I took 'being a father' out of my identity. It was similar to the way I approach other things in my life. I try to focus on my skill and things which make me happy. I write poetry, I help others, I rescue animals, I ride a motorbike. Conversely, I am not great at sports or playing an instrument ... Not being able to be a father is not something I have failed at; it is something that I was never meant to do.

SIKHUMBUZO

I have been depressed about being childless. Being a father in Zimbabwe is a very important achievement. Failing to have my own child killed my joy.



HELP IS AT HAND

There are a large number of resources for childless women, but very few specifically for childless men. Some organisations' material will be equally relevant to both men and women. (These listings are correct at the time of publication.)

- **The Childless Men's Community:** a closed Facebook men- only group giving support to childless-not-by-choice males. [facebook.com/groups/childlessmenscommunity](https://www.facebook.com/groups/childlessmenscommunity)
- **The Full Stop Community CIC:** an online support and network hub with a monthly podcast and online, diverse community open to all who identify as childless not by choice. [thefullstoppod.com](https://www.thefullstoppod.com)
- **Ageing Without Children:** a campaigning group that provides information and support. [awwoc.org](https://www.awwoc.org)
- **Gateway Women:** a support and advocacy network, with a section devoted to childless men. [gateway-women.com/resources/resourcesfor-men](https://www.gateway-women.com/resources/resourcesfor-men)
- **World Childless Week:** an annual event that offers support for childless-not-by-choice men and women. [worldchildlessweek.net](https://www.worldchildlessweek.net)
- **Childless Not by Choice:** a Facebook group offering support to the childless. [facebook.com/groups/591443651208173/members](https://www.facebook.com/groups/591443651208173/members)
- **Dr Robin A Hadley:** a website with helpful resources from the world's leading academic on male childlessness. [robinhadley.co.uk/childlessness](https://www.robinhadley.co.uk/childlessness)
- **James D'Souza:** a counselling website to help men dealing with infertility and childlessness. [jamesdsouza.com](https://www.jamesdsouza.com)
- **The Dovecote Community:** a closed Facebook men-only group offering support to the childless. [facebook.com/groups/thedovecotecommunity4men](https://www.facebook.com/groups/thedovecotecommunity4men)
- **Mensfe:** men's fertility forum providing information and support. [mensfe.net](https://www.mensfe.net)
- **Men's Fertility Support Group:** a closed Facebook men-only support group for infertile men. [facebook.com/groups/mensfertilitysupport](https://www.facebook.com/groups/mensfertilitysupport)
- **Happy and Childless App:** an app offering friendship for the childless. [happyandchildless.co.uk/happy-and-childless-app](https://www.happyandchildless.co.uk/happy-and-childless-app)
- **Walk in Our Shoes:** men's and women's experiences of living the childless-not-by-choice life. [Walkinourshoes.net](https://www.walkinourshoes.net)
- **Fertility Network:** support for those living without children due to infertility. [fertilitynetworkuk.org/life-without-children](https://www.fertilitynetworkuk.org/life-without-children)

“The man who is childless suddenly finds he has an invisible sticking plaster slapped over his mouth”

grow up is both lovely and bittersweet.’ And he has a kind of cure, ready at his fingertips. ‘Movement tends to be a remedy for me, be it walking, running, cycling, as well as being lucky enough to be able to chat to my wife about it.’ In the same vein, my partner and I are able to take trips away more or less when we want, something that a family cannot contemplate doing.

These safety routes have to be painstakingly worked out over the months and years. Before that, the childless man (and, of course, the childless woman) will experience countless episodes like those I have listed above. They will experience that familiar dread in the stomach as rooms they are already occupying fill up with arriving families and then reverberate with wall-to-wall family stories. They will wonder why

their loved ones never quite seem to get it. But the childless are clever folk and have learned to be ever-resourceful. Some kind of solution is near at hand.

If this is an issue that you, or someone close to you, is struggling with, please see the list of organisations created just to help those in this position.

I Always Wanted To Be A Dad: Men Without Children is available in hardback and paperback through Amazon, via [robertnurdan.com](https://www.robertnurdan.com) or from bookshops. Robert is also available for presentations and talks on male childlessness; contact him via [robertnurdan.com](https://www.robertnurdan.com). 

