

You're Not Alone

Interview with single parents Sarah and Andrew

'I think the stigma of being a single parent is you feel closed off to the rest of the world'

'It's a sense of loneliness not having another grownup or adult to talk to'

Celia: I'm Celia Fielke and this is *Messages of hope*. Today we're talking to Sarah and Andrew about single parenting and how they coped with raising children on their own.

Life can be tough when you're on your own, especially when you're missing companionship and someone to share your thoughts with. As a single widowed father, Andrew was with his kids, but what he really missed was another adult – someone to share the ups and downs of parenting with.

Andrew: I guess the main thing is I haven't got anybody to consult with. As a parent you know when you have a partner we bounce, well 'Jim is doing this. What do you think we should do?' So, you have that consultative process. And that's the biggest thing I've noticed - I've had to decide what I'm going to do by myself and then hopefully it's determined whether that's the right decision or not.

Celia: Sarah was used to being around people but as a young single mum she found her social life became very different.

Sarah: I wish that people could have understood my need for social interaction. Yes, I do wish that people would have gone, 'do you want me to come to your house right now,' because obviously you can't take a 5-year-old out for a coffee on a school night on a Sunday night. You know you have to make the right choice and go home. I felt really sad sometimes thinking that I was doing the right thing and getting nothing for it. So, in a sense that hurt.

Andrew: My world was just focussed around work and children and washing and cleaning and ironing and that sort of thing. So, there wasn't a lot of time for social life. It's something you really need to make an effort at to go out and see something outside of the family or work. I have purposely seen some people socially and made a bit of an effort but there's always that trade-off between leaving my kids at home to go out with someone else and so it can be a bit of a guilt trip. So, I haven't done that a lot but it is something that I think it's important to do.

Celia: We often think loneliness can be cured by simply getting out and being sociable with other people. But even in social situations you can still be made to feel isolated, whether it's deliberate or more of an unconscious thing. As single parents, both Andrew and Sarah felt they were treated differently and their sense of social isolation or loneliness was reinforced.

Sarah: My mother used to drive me nuts when I would come to the door with her first grandchild. She would say 'hello there my darling girl!' and I'd feel like I'd have to say 'Hi Mum, I'm over here!' She would be completely besotted by her grandchild and sometimes didn't look at what her first daughter might have needed.

Andrew: Well, it was interesting when my son was still going to primary, well when the two children were going to primary school, because I was a man picking up my children or being involved in dropping off at class or watching something. It was quite interesting, I think a lot of the other mothers would just walk up and talk to each other but they would sort of exclude me to a certain extent. Maybe I was oversensitive about that, but I thought it was quite - I noticed it.

Sarah: The hardest part I found was that other single parents I met I didn't always relate to as well as I thought I would. It was very hard to have women friends who weren't already married that didn't feel threatened by myself. I think the stigma of being a single parent can make you feel closed off to the rest of the world. But I'm really thankful God doesn't look at us like that. He never gives up on us. He always wants us to keep on going forward. God doesn't think of us as damaged goods.

Celia: As a single parent life can get pretty lonely. There's no one to share decision making with. And maintaining consistent and fair discipline with your kids can be extra difficult. Here's Andrew and Sarah to share how that affected the relationship with their children.

Sarah: Because of the loneliness factor, you can kind of tend to treat them like a friend rather than treat them like a child because they're the only people that you have to talk to. I can remember some of the things Maddie would say to me that would make me think 'hang on I mean I'm the authority here' and she is talking to me like I'm her mate or one of our friends at school. And then I realised I think I had perhaps been speaking to her from a buddy form of a relationship rather than a parent.

Andrew: It's a fine line, and telling my 18-year-old daughter that she can't do something just doesn't wash. You need to consult with her about why I don't want her to do this so it is more of a consultative process. I've always had trust in my children, and I've always said to them that 'you don't have to earn my trust, you have my trust and it's up to you then to be mature about that trust and manage your life accordingly.'

Sarah: I think the biggest thing that I couldn't provide my daughter was perspective. You know to have someone who could've shown me more perspective of the situation, to say 'just hang on' or just you know 'back off, don't be so hard on yourself'. you know, 'don't beat yourself up when things go wrong.' I was being hard and not giving myself a bit more grace in the situation and therefore probably not giving my daughter much grace either. I think just having another person there, a second person looking in on the situation, that's what I probably really missed

Celia: If you've found a positive way to cope with loneliness, we'd love to hear about it. You can share your story on our Facebook page at 'Messages of hope'. Your story may help someone else.

Single parents Sarah and Andrew struggled with finding a good social network because of being overwhelmed with all the responsibilities of raising children on their own. They knew something had to change

Andrew: I've made more of an effort just to go up and talk to people too. Whereas before I'd stand there and watch sport and you know I think it was always the expectation that the fathers would gravitate towards each other and the mothers would gravitate towards each other and discuss things. Well sometimes there'd only be mothers there so then

you'd just stand there alone. But after a while I just think 'oh blow it', you'd just go up and say hello and just chat. And I mean it's all fine.

Sarah: You do need to have that something that you can reward yourself with. It might be a coffee with a friend, or it might be a hobby that you enjoy or it might be just quiet time. It really depends on your personality and what fills your tank, and we've all got different personalities and each different thing will uniquely satisfy us personally.

Andrew: Being a single parent, you can be a martyr and you can quite easily fall into that sense of 'Oh woe is me, I have to do everything myself' and I don't think this really matters whether you're a male or female. Being a single parent is really a hard job. But there are friends that help. In my case, my parents are very helpful with regards to looking after the children and it's really important to have a person you can vent to talking about what you're feeling and how things are going and that sort of thing. I had a couple of people that I was able to discuss things with about what I should be doing about parenting, or you know just 'life is really crappy at the moment.' And it was quite interesting in both cases both those people were women and mothers. So, I was actually getting mothering tips from other women, and I found that easier rather than talking to another man.

Celia: Loneliness can leave you feeling like no-one is on your side and no-one cares. That makes life really hard to deal with. Andrew and Sarah, both single parents had hard times, as we've heard. But their faith in God gave them perspective and was actually strengthened by what they learnt and by what they'd been through.

Sarah: I was really in a very, very bad way, I kind of had spits and spats of church as I was growing up. And I remember sort of being in my bedroom and thinking you know 'God I feel like I'm missing something that everyone else has got.' It wasn't until I got to the church that I did have people that had a lot of compassion on me and understanding. I didn't find them to be judgmental at all. I mean I guess perhaps there were some, but I mean I didn't really associate with those sort of people because obviously they weren't from a background where they could be understanding of my plight. But I had so much support from my church. I was able to turn my life around because of people being accepting of me.

Andrew: It's interesting in the last year of my wife's life we talked a lot about faith and Christianity. I really found the way she handled her disease and eventually facing that it was fatal and she was she was dying was a real inspiration. She had no fear of dying whatsoever. My Christian faith actually strengthened during that time, and I believe I have a stronger Christian faith now than what I did prior to when she was first diagnosed with breast cancer. I had a very real sense that I could just put my grief, put my concerns, put my life in God's hands and be comforted that he is there with me. He is a very real person, it was just it was just like having a really close friend to rely on. And it's a really hard thing to describe because that's faith. Faith is not tangible. And you know just having the faith that knowing that God loves us so much that he sent his Son to the cross to die for our sins. And that's just such a wonderful thing to know that magnitude of love. And I've taken a lot of comfort in knowing that he is there to help me.

Sarah: I think it's just been God's transformation here. You know the grace that he's shown me and I think that if you can have a spirit of not giving up on somebody, you don't say just because you did this that you are a write-off. Growing up as a single parent, people did view you like that. You know you were a write-off. But I think God helped me to turn around my thinking; 'You're not a write-off Sarah. I didn't think of you as being a write-off. It's never too late to turn your life around.'

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