

When a Man is Grieving

Understanding and Supporting Unique Perspectives of Bereavement

When John Gray popularized the notion that “men are from Mars and women are from Venus,” men and women alike applauded his efforts. “At last—somebody understands us and isn’t trying to turn us into girls,” remarked one young man upon discovering Gray’s book.

Whether gender differences in grief expression are mostly due to nature or to nurture may still be debated. But no one could seriously question the notion that, as a general rule, men and women grieve differently. All you have to do is look at the ways husbands and wives cope with the death of a child to see these differences and the strain the differences can put on a marriage.

Some men were taught as boys that tears and sadness are not male traits. When hit by an errant pitch or he is the object of a particularly hard tackle in a football game, every generation of male athlete has been reminded to “Take one for the team,” preferably without whining or complaining!

Whether you are a grieving man or you care about one, understanding some of the unique ways men grieve can be useful. These are generalizations and everyone is different. Still these ideas may help create understanding.

Some men cry easily and that does not make them any less of men. In fact, some evidence now suggests that as men grow older, many become quite a bit more emotionally sensitive, one result of the changing hormone levels that accompany normal aging. If you are a man in your 50’s and beyond, you may find you tear-up much more readily today than a decade or two ago.

Some men find small group sharing experiences to be extraordinarily meaningful, but not all do. If one is available in your community, you might want to connect with a bereavement group focused just on widowers or bereaved dads, for example.

Hormonal differences between males and females clearly account for some differences in the ways men and women grieve. Neurobiologists are learning more every day about the way our brains function, but the effects on the brain of sex hormones is substantial.

Beginning at puberty, males have astronomically higher levels of Testosterone, the hormone that accounts for bulkier muscles, hair growth, the density of bones, and the tendency toward assertiveness.



Why men grieve differently might be open to discussion; that men grieve differently is clearly not

Some evidence suggests testosterone might also be one of the explanations for why men tend to “compartmentalize” life. The result of this ability to compartmentalize experiences explains why one bereaved dad can go to work three weeks after his son’s death, put in a full day’s work, and then realize on the drive home how sad he is. Throughout the day, he may not have thought about his son at all, but on the drive home, is overwhelmed by the loss.

All responses to grief occur on a continuum with few people existing on either end of a scale. For example, some people tend to be very cognitively focused and others driven mostly by their emotions—but most people live somewhere in between, exhibiting a preference for one way or another.

One client with whom I worked was an engineer by training, priding himself in his ability to make good, rational decisions. But when his wife died suddenly, he became, in his words, “A weeping heep.” Throughout his adult life, he had managed to keep his emotions “in check,” but this overwhelming experience elicited tears he had not often seen.

If you are a man in grief, resist the urge to try “going it alone.” You may feel that no one understands your grief, and certainly in one important way, you are right. No other person had exactly the same relationship you had with your loved one, so your experience with grief will reflect the unique relationship you experienced.

If you care for a grieving man, understand that men in grief are more inclined than women to withdraw from affiliation with others. Pushing him to join a grief group will likely backfire. Instead, many men find *one* confidant—a golf buddy, male hospice volunteer, fellow member of the faith community, or co-worker. Encourage this connection.

Either in place of group involvement or in addition to it, some men find writing to be an important way to express the sadness. One way to start a journal is by completing sentences like, “Today, I missed you the most when. . .” or “Right now, I’m feeling a lot of anger/guilt/sadness/ loneliness about. . .” Make the journal your record of thoughts, insights, and new discoveries in your journey through grief. Don’t forget to date each entry, since in the months to come, your journal will provide a record of your progress.

One unhealthy way to cope with bereavement is to attempt to substitute other satisfactions for the relationship that has been lost. Instead of admitting the sadness and loneliness, these men turn to sex, alcohol, fast cars, and other relationships, almost as if they are trying to replace what they lost. In the long run, you take better care of yourself when you face the sadness of the loss rather than trying to substitute other people or things for the one who died.

If you or the man you care about experiences persistent anger or a low mood most days, most of the day, and especially if these feelings are accompanied by a lack of desire in whatever hobbies and pursuits have always brought joy and fulfillment, consultation with a mental health professional is warranted.

Deep sadness and intense anger are normal in early bereavement. But if the experience seems to deepen with time instead of lifting, and especially if the sadness or anger is accompanied by periods of not caring about life, it is possible that the normal sadness of bereavement has become clinical depression. Many effective treatments exist to help men cope with these experiences, but consultation with a mental health practitioner is warranted.

In bereavement, one of the most important ways to take care of yourself is to make sure you eat right, exercise regularly, and get enough rest. Whatever you do, do not try to face your bereavement alone. Talk to a member of the clergy, a supportive friend or family member, or a professional caregiver, because bereavement is best managed when we don’t try to go it alone.

This article was written for Keyser Funeral Service by William G. Hoy. A nationally-known educator and counselor in the field of bereavement, Dr. Hoy provides clinical oversight to the bereavement program of Pathways Volunteer Hospice in Long Beach, California. Copyright ©2008 by GriefConnect, Inc. All rights reserved.

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