

GRIEVING IS NOT WEAKNESS, IT IS A NECESSITY

A man should be encouraged to experience and explore his own feelings in a way that feels comfortable for him.

Grief takes time, like the healing of a wound. Yet many of us put time limits on our grief. As a physical wound heals and forms a scar, our grief gradually diminishes. It never quite goes away, but we learn to “live around it”.



People cope with their grief in different ways. Some grieve openly, others privately. It is not always evident that someone is grieving.

Nevertheless, grief needs to be expressed or processed so it can heal. If not, other symptoms may appear and effect our health and/or behaviour.



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A MAN'S VIEW OF GRIEVING

Bereavement is a major life crisis. The loss of someone close, particularly a spouse or a child, is life's most stressful event.

MEN

From childhood, men have been exposed to a social conditioning process that establishes expectations and conventions which often serve as barriers. These often subtle barriers rob men of the opportunity to grieve in an open, public way - an opportunity traditionally given to women.

Whether they are also effective in hindering men's ability to grieve privately is difficult to determine. A brief look at these roles may indicate how most men have been hindered in their capacity to grieve openly. These comments are general and may apply to individuals in varying ways and varying degrees.

Strong Man Role

The strong man role is typified by such comments as "big boys don't cry", "don't be a sissy" and "be brave", all potentially heard during childhood. Television and movies reinforce these comments in adolescence and adulthood. Women who are also subjected to the same conditioning hold similar expectations of their men.

When the grieving man, (father, husband, son) feels sad, what outlets does he have? Does he surrender to the lump in his throat or the tears in his eyes? Probably not, unless he is by himself in a private place. Society accepts men crying at the time of a death and at the funeral, but not for long afterwards. Friends "help" the man to maintain this strong man role with comments such as "you are doing well" or "someone has to be strong enough through this whole thing".

Protector Role

This is said to be the "natural" role of men. Because a loved one has died, the man may feel that he is a failure in this role. His sense of failure is further

reinforced when he can't protect the rest of his family from the pain and grief nor shield them from the effects of his own grief. He is regularly reminded of his protector role by comments such as "How's your wife and/or children doing?"

Self-sufficient Man Role

Men often maintain a self-sufficient role that serves to prevent them from reaching out to others. "If only my husband (father) would get some help, he would feel better" is a comment made by many distraught family members. During his lifetime he has probably been urged to "stand on your own feet", and "learn to do it by yourself", which reinforce his need to be seen as self-sufficient.

Many men resist seeking professional help and are often reluctant to come to meetings with other grieving men where feelings can be shared. They are left to struggle through their own feelings and emotions and finding ways to express them. Men often have little experience in sharing feelings with the family and have learned that you don't share feelings with other men.

The result is that men are often barred from openly displaying their emotions and at the same time also denied the opportunity to explore their own feelings.

Provider Role

The death of a loved one has occurred, someone has to provide, so the man returns to work. He finds that his coworkers treat him differently.

They may avoid him, or try to protect him from the normal stresses and challenges of the work, which tends to reinforce his sense of failure and his low self-worth.

He feels isolated. He may throw himself into his work, but each evening he returns home where the reality of death and grief await him.

At this time, he may start working overtime, drinking at the local club or bar, becoming more involved in service club activities. Such behaviours are judged as the man trying to forget his grief-filled reality of home, to avoid the pain of grief. But is he really avoiding his grief?

He has been told (directly and indirectly) that this is not the best way to deal with things.

On the other hand, when the wife or mother spends all her time weeding the garden or is not able to do more than physically keep the rest of the family going, people understand. It's quite a common reaction.

Her behaviour is not labeled as avoiding grief, but the man's is. This double standard may hinder the man in his particular grief. People do not see the man's behaviour as a common, natural reaction too. He is called selfish and uncaring because he won't talk about it.

With such negative value placed on this behaviour, the man can feel inadequate about himself or what he's doing. He may feel isolated and misunderstood. To expect open displays of grief from all men could be counter productive to their grieving. Such unrecognized differences exist in the way men and women grieve.

Because of this, neither is able to fully comfort the other. Many times, anger or frustration occurs, putting an even greater strain on the family in this already traumatic period.
