

# Do Men Grieve Differently?

## Hospice and Palliative Care of Greensboro

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We know that people handle loss and grief in different ways. The most marked difference seems to be between men and women and there are many reasons for this. Some have to do with the family in which one grows up and some with variations in personality. Other differences have to do with the difference in brain structure between men and women. Recent research has shown that the brains of men and women are constructed differently. Therefore, they process information differently and have different perceptions, priorities, behavior and ways of handling emotions.

One of the major reasons for the difference in how men and women grieve has to do with cultural expectations - the way our society defines "masculine" and "feminine."

### Some of These Are:

- Taking charge, problem solving
- Being "strong", supporting others
- Less expression of feelings, more concerned with thinking than feeling
- Independent, self-contained
- Striving, moving, activity
- Seeing death/grief as a challenge to be overcome, a test of masculinity

These expectations of men cause a major block to their expression of grief. There is a lot of discomfort in our culture when a man weeps openly or shudders with fear. Because "being a man" means avoiding his feelings and moving into thinking and activity, he is set up to move away from his grief instead of moving toward it. He is unable to do the work of mourning his loss.

Men are expected to be a strong rock, protector and problem-solver for their families. They are rarely offered any other way of grieving than being strong, capable, in control and managing their family's grief. This means they must postpone their own grief to be the support for others. Part of healing may mean a temporary dependence on someone to hear a man's pain and help him process his grief. Yet, for many men, this sort of dependency is seen as "weakness." Many boys learn early in life that being male means not depending on anybody but yourself and keeping a "stiff upper lip." To have to be dependent, even briefly, can cause men to feel anxious and vulnerable; therefore, they refuse the help needed for healing. They hurt and know they hurt, but prefer to cope with the pain alone. They are more oriented to fact gathering and problem-solving and usually choose not to participate in support that is oriented toward talking and feeling. Avoiding the work of grief causes a lot of complicated grief among men in our culture, which can destroy their ability to enjoy life again.

### Men May Grieve by:

- Returning to normal activity as quickly as possible/staying busy
- Visiting the gravesite often
- Trying not to think about it
- Expressing anger more than women
- Insisting on investigations or bringing lawsuits (doing something)
- Replacing their lost loved one, i.e. remarriage as soon as possible

### Consequences of Complicated Mourning for Some Men:

- Experiencing more physical symptoms-headaches, fatigue, backaches
- More substance abuse/addictive behavior, dependency

- Having more accidents
- Over-representation in mental institutions
- Chronic depression, withdrawal, low self-esteem
- Indifference toward others, insensitivity, workaholism

In contrast, women are more expressive about their loss, more emotional about it and more likely to look for support from others. They find their place in the world through relationships, which enable them to talk about their hurts, problems and pain and to be supported and encouraged. They feel their way through the grief process and are usually able to disclose their most intimate feelings.

As a result of her research into how men and women grieve, Carol Staudacher structured the grief process into three phases:

**Phase One: *Retreating*.** Temporary management of pain and anxiety, shock, numbness, disbelief, confusion and denial.

**Phase Two: *Working through*** by confronting, and enduring. Having a range of responses by thinking, talking, crying and writing about the loss in their lives.

**Phase Three: *Resolving*** by reorganizing and restructuring life. She found that this phase is something men are well equipped to do. They are masters at reorganizing and restructuring because it involves a lot of thinking. For most men, thinking is their gift.

Carol found that both men and women tend to go through phases one and three. Differences between them seem to arise in phase two. Her research showed that men have four typical male coping styles that are legitimate and acceptable alternatives to phase two for working through their grief. These patterns enable them to take advantage of their natural gifts and talents.

1. Remain silent.
2. Engage in "Secret Grief."
3. Take physical and legal action.
4. Become immersed in activity.

She says, further, that the important issue is for both men and women to use their own strengths to deal with grief and in time both genders will work out their grief. One way of grieving is not better than another. There are just differences in how it is handled. These differences need to be celebrated, not corrected.

In conclusion, she says, the tasks of grief are experienced individually. Respect must be experienced so no one's grief is disenfranchised if they do not meet expectations of how it ought to be done!

Reference: Harper, Jeanne M., Copyright. Alpha-Omega Venture.

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