

Men and Grief

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by Jeanne M. Harper

Ken Doka speaks of “disenfranchised grief” that is when loss cannot be openly acknowledged socially sanctioned or publicly shared. One of the reasons maybe that the “griever is not recognized.”

Quite often that is exactly what happens to men in their families. The stereotypical man is to “be strong and frequently required to not show emotion at the time of death of their loved ones.

Problems this can create may include a bad mood, lack of social support, exclusion from care. The grief may then be intensified, and without support the male griever is ALONE.

Carol Staudacher in her 1991 book MEN AND GRIEF, demonstrates how typical males may respond to death of their loved one. She bases her theory on Havinghurst’s Tasks of Mourning which was elaborated by Dr. William Worden in his book GRIEF COUNSELING GRIEF THERAPY. Carol reports from her research that most grievers, male and female, go through Phase One:

PHASE ONE. Retreating: temporary manage pain and anxiety shock, numbness, disbelief, confusion, disorientation denial. Goal: Grappling with and testing reality

Men appear to go through Phase One and Three. Differences for men and women seem to arise in Phase Two:

PHASE TWO. Working through: by confronting and enduring. Having a range of responses by thinking, talking, crying, writing about disorganization in their lives. Goal: Detachment from loved one NOT from emotions; must experience the pain

Many men have been raised to NOT talk, cry, or reach out (for Support). Therefore, their grief tends to stay inside and can create physical ailments, as studies have shown. Heart attacks, ulcers, cancer are a few of the physical ailments that can be created when the grief stays within. Men who do express, release or completely work through their grief are the EXCEPTION rather than the rule.

The third phase is something most men are exceptional at doing. They can be masters at reorganizing and restructuring because it involves a lot of THINKING. For most men, objective THINKING is their gift.

PHASE THREE. Resolving: reorganizing and restructuring life. Goals: Adjust to Environment-take on new identity Reinvest Time and Energy-develop new goals

Carol’s research shows that men have established four typical male coping styles that are LEGITIMATE and ACCEPTABLE alternatives to WORKING THROUGH grief (Phase 2). These patterns have enabled them to take advantage of their natural gifts and talents.

1. Remain Silent—They will keep the pain to themselves They appear to not need to communicate about their grief. The non – communication helps them protect themselves against being vulnerable-which to them is “expressing” grief through tears, feelings, sharing.
2. Engaging in “Secret Grief”—This is a method of “solitary mourning” activities, i.e. taking the new puppy for a walk—puppy represents NEW LIFE and crying and feeling as they walk, hug and play with the NEW LIFE. They do this solitary mourning to “spare others from seeing, feeling, experiencing their grief. For most men to do otherwise seems against “cultural expectations”.
3. Taking Physical & Legal Action – Many men immediately attempt to bring control to an “out of control” situation by taking physical and legal action for extended periods of time. Others support and reward them for being “assertive and courageous” in their time of grief.
4. Becoming Immersed in Activity – Most men become obsessive about activity. They diligently find things to, occupy their time...all of it. They fill “every waking minute” with work, errands, house activities. This immersion consumes time, energy and thought so there is no time for grief, no time for thinking of the loss and no time for feeling the grief pain.

Recently, I attended a conference on death education and counseling in Portland. Ken Doka and Terry Martin presented a session on men and grief. They found in their studies that men needed closed groups with separate subjects planned for each session. The material needed to be presented in a problem-solving mode. A method most men feel accustomed to. Supporters of men need to allow for the expression of emotion in ways that are compatible to the male roles {such as the patterns that Staudacher described}. Ask questions “how did you react” rather than “how do you feel”. Most men need to return to work as soon as possible. Research showed that most men felt better if they were working (again this corresponds with Staudacher’s work).

The important issue is that each gender uses their own STRENGTHS to deal with grief and IN TIME they, both genders, out of their grief. One way of grieving is NOT better than another. Rather there are differences in how they grieve. These differences need to be CELEBRATED, not corrected. Carl Jung says we balance our lives as we age...men become more in touch with their feminine qualities and women become more aggressive and in touch with their male qualities. Each gender’s way of coping has negative AND positive aspects.

In conclusion, the tasks of grief [testing the reality, experiencing the pain, adjusting to the environment and reinvesting time and energy back into life], are experienced individually. Respect must be experienced so we do not “disenfranchise” anyone’s grief or grieving process due to our stereotypical expectations. Men and women must come to a point where they can learn from each other’s methods of grieving, rather than judge these methods. We need to understand their are personality style differences, as well as male/female differences. All differences can be CELEBRATED, it is your choice.