



Do Men and Women Grieve the Same Way?

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The differences in communication styles between men and women is well understood by anyone who is married or lived with the opposite sex or even worked with the opposite sex. There wouldn't be sitcoms if there weren't such marked differences! Women tend to be more emotionally expressive, enjoy talking about their feelings to trusted others, in fact many NEED to talk about their feelings in order to feel better. Women are typically not embarrassed or ashamed of emotion and therefore, women respond well to each other when emotion is expressed. Men, on the other hand, are often quite opposite. Men shy away from expressing emotion, are often silent when emotions are intense and often are visually uncomfortable when other men express emotion. Men often respond to emotion by wanting to "fix it." And this is where grief can really complicate things because with grief there is nothing to fix, there is nothing to do. Men often withdraw from others, isolate themselves in their pain and can look more angry than sad.

When couples share the loss of a loved one such as a child, each can feel as though the other doesn't understand. In reality, each can be desperately struggling but because each struggles so differently from each other, it is easy to misunderstand or become judgmental about how the other is grieving. A man might clear-cut a piece of land, go for long drives, sit alone outside for hours at a time, or work overtime as he attempts to manage his grief. A woman tends to talk to friends or family often, cry openly, seek out others for comfort, appear to "wallow" in the pain, and have more difficulty focusing on the usual responsibilities of work. One couple, whose 19 year old daughter was killed in a automobile accident, shared an incident that demonstrated their differences perfectly. The woman came home from work one day in December and her husband was hanging Christmas lights. She was horrified, "How could you even think we would celebrate the holidays?"

He was taken aback by her response, “I was just trying to make (fix) you feel better!”

So how do couples survive when each is hurting so differently? The first thing is to be willing to accept AND respect the differences in grieving styles. This requires trust, compassion and commitment to the other. This may also require some assistance from a grief specialist who can help identify and discuss the differences between the partners. The second thing is to find a way to share some (maybe not all) feelings with each other while recognizing that a woman may need to say much more than a man. Men often need to learn how to “be present” in another’s pain by listening, sitting close, holding hands, and just being quiet. All the while, recognizing there is nothing to fix. A woman’s challenge is to understand that because there may be no outward expression of emotion in her mate, it doesn’t mean there is no inward pain. Just because a man doesn’t cry openly doesn’t mean he doesn’t cry at all. Women tend to want to discuss the hurting, and men often will say it just isn’t helpful to talk about it. These are significant differences which when examined and understood can lead to a softer heart towards the other.

Stages and timelines of grief are part of the myths of the grieving process that we talk about in therapy. Many try to pigeonhole themselves or their spouse in one of the stages which isn’t helpful and can become frustrating. Grieving is far messier than any predetermined stage or framework. The last thing a grieving person needs is a message of what he or she is “supposed” to be feeling!

So be gentle with each other, be patient with each other and share your feelings and worries when you are able. Grief is a long process, so hold on tight to your mate and open your hearts to each other.

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