

Men's Reactions to Loss
We're All the Same and Different
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After thousands of years of indoctrination, biological association and cultural expectation, there are an abundance of clichés about the differences between men and women and how we react to grief and sadness. At this point, it is not very relevant whether these differences are biological (different brains) or environmental (learned behavior) other than to acknowledge that both factors have had strong influences upon men and women and continue to affect the way we perceive and react to loss. Exploring these differences can help us better understand our own reactions, as well as others we wish to support or help through painful times.

There is a wide spectrum of emotions, thoughts and reactions which men experience when there is a sudden or expected loss in their life. The following does not apply to all men all the time, but are observations about some patterns that exist within a majority of men in grief. There are hundreds of shades of gray, nuance and exceptions. No man (or woman) is exactly like another; we are shaped by our biology, family and community environment, religious background, cultural norms and individual personality. Men are not from Mars and women are not from Venus. We are all born and we all die on the same planet Earth.

The Obvious

Now that it's clear that we are all the same and different, we will identify some of the obvious generalities about men and grief.

Men are told by their parents, families, friends, lovers, religions, governments and the media to stay in control, be strong, grin and bear it, be providers, endure to the bitter end, win at all costs, act logically, perform, achieve, don't cry and above all be in control. Some of these messages are blatant and others more subtle. Some are proclaimed orally or in print and others are non-verbal and observed by actions and deeds. They all tell boys that in order to be a "real man" you must never ever express or convey fear, dependence, loneliness, weakness, passivity or insecurity. When men are hurt growing up, they are told to "get up and brush it off". That is one reason it can feel so overwhelming when a man experiences the natural reactions to loss and grief and they can't just "brush it off" and carry on as if nothing has happened.

When a man loses a loved one, by death or separation, they can be thrown into an unknown world of pain that casts their beliefs, personal expectations and accepted ways of being into an ocean of doubt, turmoil and isolation. Loss can cause an eruption of feelings, fears and thoughts that fly in the face of what it has meant to "be a man" and assail the very concept and view of how one perceives themselves and who they "think" they are.

Men tend to think in a linear fashion and are prone to getting from point A to point B. If something disrupts the "plan" or how things "should be going", it can throw them for a loop, especially when there is no clear cut map or manual for how to fix the problem or get back on the road.

Johnny, whose long-time girlfriend had died from ovarian cancer, said, "Tell me what to do. How do I fix this? There must be some steps or some way to move on."

Efforts at avoiding, "toughing it out" or "getting rid" of the pain of loss usually result in temporary relief and rarely change the reality of the condition. The pain of grief is one of the few kinds of pain in life that are best dealt with head on, by doing something men are often taught to avoid. The pain of grief and mourning tend to change and heal with time and attention (not just time) when we can honestly acknowledge what we are feeling, thinking and believing and externalize such reactions in a positive, healthy environment and/or manner.

It's not what you say, but how you say it.

Both genders feel the impact of grief and loss in many of the same ways. What tends to be different about the sexes is the *way* in which we talk about and verbalize such feelings and experiences. We filter them differently.

Men often talk about the things we *did* for our loved one, how we took care of them, what we are *doing* now and what we *plan* to do in the future. We blame others or ourselves for something that did or didn't happen or something that could have been different, i.e. something that would have spared us the pain we are now experiencing. Anger, guilt and reasoning are ways we try to control and make sense out of our grief and the situation it has put us in. It doesn't actually give us any more control, but rather a *sense* of control.

Mark expressed this sentiment when he said, "That doctor was a jerk. He never listened to anything Allison (his wife who died of heart failure) said. I hope I never see him again. I'm not sure what I'd do if I did." On a later visit, Mark said sadly, "I shouldn't

have gone to sleep that night. I should have known. If I'd been with her, I could have given her some medicine or helped her in some way. I know it. I just know it."

Mark's anger, guilt and false sense of control need not be interpreted as negative or unreasonable reactions. When it can be seen for what it is, it can be an ideal opportunity to explore what it is we are trying to control or explain and why: a way of trying to come to terms with situations and events that are out of our control. "If only..."

Men tend to speak "about" instead of "with". If you ask a man how he's been "feeling" or what has been the most difficult thing about the loss of his wife, partner or parent, he might look at you as if you were speaking an unfamiliar foreign language.

Paul had been told to come for counseling because his aunt was concerned about his reactions to his mother's death. He had not been talking about it or sharing his feelings with her for many months. He said, "She's always asking me 'how I feel' or telling me I should 'talk about it'. It's crazy. I think about her all the time, but it's not something I'm going to go blabbing about. I'm dealing with it. I don't need my aunt telling me what I should be doing or how I should be doing it."

If on the other hand you questioned him about his "reactions" or asked him to tell you a story "about" the deceased or separated, he would be more likely to take the road to the same valley of pain that a woman experiences; but he could more easily do so by taking this different route. As he "tells the story" he can delve or acknowledge as many of the painful feelings and reactions he's been having as he chooses, when he chooses. It will be on his terms and in the context of his "reactions" and what "happened", as opposed to talking about some nebulous or frightening feelings and emotions.

Jerry's brother had died from complications of alcoholism. He hadn't been surprised when his brother died, but it had brought up a lifetime of conflicted emotions. Instead of asking Jerry to talk about his feelings, he was asked to describe his reactions since the death. "I just keep working and taking care of the family, you know," he explained, "One foot in front of another". "It's been rough, but it's not like it was a shock or anything. We saw it coming for a long time." Within the context of sharing his reactions to the death, he mentioned it 'being rough' and 'a shock'. Both are intense and normal reactions to loss, but Jerry didn't need to be asked to 'talk about them', since he already was. At a subsequent meeting, Jerry told the "story" about his brother Ralph and by doing so revealed the mixture of associations, feelings and thoughts he'd had about his brother since childhood and how he was making sense of them now.

When the grief journey is presented as a problem-solving cognitive activity that men can *do* something about, they are much more likely to connect and allow themselves to process and identify with what they are experiencing.

Vince was feeling a mixture of feelings. He felt overwhelmed and said he was at a loss about what to do since his sister had died. He wanted a blue print, a way to "get out of this mess". Though he never described his feelings directly, such as feeling angry, frustrated and sad, it was clear that he was experiencing all of these emotions and more. He didn't want someone to tell him what he already knew or to identify himself as "emotional". He wanted some direction, a finger pointing in the right way. He wasn't expecting the "perfect answer", but some validation that what he was experiencing was "normal" and there was a way out (sooner or later).

It is when men are involved in an activity that they most often let the memories, sadness and tears come forth. Going on a walk, taking the dog out, building something, working, cleaning or doing some "project" can often be just as healing or more so, for men, than to sit with someone who expects them to cry, "break down" and talk about their loss.

Stephen wasn't about to let anyone know that he was having trouble sleeping at night or he felt like his life was a nightmare after his wife had died in an accident, so he decided to sue the car company of the car she'd been driving. After many months of struggle to find a lawyer and being repeatedly told that he had no case, he realized that he had to "do something" to "make it right". "Everything started to change," he said, "when I shifted into doing something to help others and not just trying to get back at somebody or fix what couldn't be fixed. I'm a pretty good mechanic myself, so I started helping out some of Susan's friends and my sister and Mom when they were having trouble with their cars. I wanted to make sure that nothing would happen to them and did everything possible to prevent an accident. I know it can still happen, but it helps to know I'm doing everything I can in my control to stop it."

Steven Kalas shares in his book *Human Matters* a quote from one of his teachers who said, "If I had to put in a one-liner the most pervasive and chronic psycho emotional handicaps of the genders, I would still say, even after all these years since Freud, feminism and the men's movement: Men can't cry, and women can't get pissed."

There is a lot of truth in that statement and yet it also perpetuates the myth that men have to cry and women need to get angry in order to not be "handicapped". Although those are both qualities that tend to be absent with the associated gender and

can be strengthened, acknowledged and encouraged, they need not be the expectation for ultimate health and well-being. There is some evidence that there are biological reasons for these emotional differences. Men have less prolactin than adult woman. Prolactin is a hormone that is excreted by the pituitary gland and causes tears. Until age 12, boys and girls have equal amounts; but as they become adults the levels of prolactin in men falls dramatically as their levels of testosterone rise.

Whether a man cries or does not is less important than whether he is acknowledging to himself (and if possible to another) what he is experiencing, how he is reacting and what he is doing to "work with it". Being honest with one's self is the most difficult aspect of any "problem" or situation, especially when it is dealing with loss, grief and separation. When men are able to admit that something has changed and they are questioning "what to do about it", they are more likely to be open to suggestions, support and finding their own way. Most men don't want therapy or to be psychoanalyzed; they just want validation, acknowledgment and information. They want to feel like they're "figuring things out" on their own. Men (and women) don't need to be patronized, minimized or categorized. They want understanding, support and tools that make a difference.

Intimacy

The women in men's life are whom he tends to share his most intimate needs, desires and fears with, as it is seldom safe or accepted to talk about such things with other men. Thus, when a woman mate, friend or mother dies or leaves, men often have nobody they feel they can acceptably turn to and their need for intimate human contact and

emotional well being is left in a desert of thirst for companionship, friendship, validation and/or physical contact.

"I told Sherry everything," Ben said. "She knew exactly what I was thinking." He hung his head. "Nobody else has a clue. I have no idea what to do." He looked up. "For the last 4 months I've stuffed everything inside or tried not to think about it. I feel so alone."

Many men, though not all, also connect physical touch with sex, because it is one of the few occasions in their lives when they are permitted or expected to touch or be touched. To hug, kiss or embrace another man or woman, aside from the act of sex, is frowned upon and charged with a variety of expectations, judgments and fears. Thus, after the death of a loved one or a separation, men often do not know how, where or when it is acceptable or possible to have any human contact that is not sexual or when to get involved in another intimate relationship.

"I don't know what the hell to do," Samson explained. "It's only been 10 months since Jasmine passed, but there's this lady I've known for a long time and there's something definitely going on between us."

There are no steadfast rules or secret formulas to reassure someone that is experiencing and contemplating such thoughts and concerns about loving again, but there are some observations and suggestions that may provide some comfort and reassurance.

- You may choose to never get married or in a relationship again and that's OK.
- You will never forget the person you lost, no matter who you join up with in the future, nor how deeply in love and involved that relationship becomes.

- ❑ Other people want you to "go out" again, not because you necessarily should or shouldn't, but because they want you to be happy and they think another relationship will provide that kind of happiness and is the magic pill to "make you feel better" or "help you get over it".
- ❑ Most people who have experienced a good marriage or partnership have a natural desire, at some point in their lives, to repeat that experience.
- ❑ Look closely and honestly at your motivation for companionship. How much of your wish to *be* with someone else is out of loneliness and need? What values or interests are you ignoring in order to "be with" someone else? Can the person you develop a new relationship with accept and understand that your deceased mate will always be part of your life?
- ❑ Loving another person and being loved by another is a natural human need and desire. To do so shows no disrespect for the one that has died. There is plenty of room in our hearts to hold the loved one who died and love another. We don't have to throw one person out in order to make room for someone else.
- ❑ You will never have an identical love or relationship with another that you had with the person who died or left, but that doesn't mean you can't experience the same intensity or depth of connection with another. It will not be the same, but it can be just as profound and intimate.
- ❑ Some people choose not to have another lover in their life and are perfectly happy. Others stay alone out of fear and some because of circumstances beyond their control.

Many times the questions men ask surrounding whether or not to get involved with another comes from fears of losing someone again. When we have lost a loved one to death or separation we are more aware than most of the reality of our limited lives and realize the fact that at some point in all relationships, either by one person choosing to leave or by death, one of us will leave the other. We consciously and most often unconsciously tell ourselves, "If I let myself love again and become intimate and attached to another, that person may leave me or die. I don't want to experience that kind of pain again."

These reactions and thoughts are entirely understandable. We all try to protect ourselves to varying degrees and lengths from painful experiences; but to do so at all costs ends up being too costly. It cuts us off from other aspects of life. The eternal Shakespearean question remains. "Is it better to have loved and lost, than never loved at all?" We must each find within ourselves when, how and/or if we choose to love again.

Don't Just Sit There, *Do* Something!

When it comes to grief, loss and separation, men don't have to *sit there and take it*. Mourning the loss of someone you love, adore, respect, hate, despise or have any combination of feelings toward takes time, attention and action. Sometimes grief can cause such exhaustion and lethargy that it can seem impossible to do anything other than get through the day. The irony is that once you get moving, emoting or acting it usually increases your motivation, energy and health.

Once we have taken the time to acknowledge our loss (whatever it may be) and understand the impact and changes it is causing in our lives, we can then find ways to

relieve, release, expel, create, explore and/or honor those feelings, sensations, thoughts, memories and beliefs.

Grief can involve the most painful emotions we have ever experienced. It is natural and understandable to want them to stop. One would have to be a masochist if they wanted such feelings to remain. Thus we ask the understandable question, "When will it stop?!"

Unlike most kinds of pain where medical attention or medication can remedy the situation, the pains of grief are hard to shake, avoid or medicate. If it was advantageous to avoid or medicate ourselves after a death, we would encourage people to do so; but usually such avoidance or use of chemicals to numb the body, heart and mind's reactions to separation simply delays, suppresses or complicates matters.

Though there are thousands of ways to positively release the pressure cooker of emotion and suffering that death and separation can cause, here are a few brief suggestions. Men (and women) can duplicate these actions in their own lives or use them as a catalyst for their own unique creations and manifestations of grief. The only precaution is that they are done in a safe environment and/or with people that are trusted (where one does not have to censure oneself) and that they not cause harm to oneself or another.

- ❑ Attend and/or create a service or event for the person who has died (which is actually for those living). Gatherings for the dead have many names - funerals, memorials, remembrances, wakes, celebrations and send-offs. They may be different in form, intent, content and cultural expectation, but they all speak to our human need to acknowledge the profound experience of death and make some

sense out of loss. Whether public or private, families, relatives and friends gathering to proclaim the life and death of someone they knew is a centuries old ritual that can provide comfort, solace and support. Funerals give us the opportunity to say, "Yes, my loved one has died. Yes, other people recognize the fact of their death. I am not alone in this experience. In the midst of death, there are the living and the memory of the one who died. Yes, I see that their life has had an impact on others as well as me. Their life was significant. Their existence in my life had and will continue to have meaning."

- Eat one good meal a day.
- Exercise; even when you don't feel like it. Walk, run, swim, hike, bicycle, workout, dance at least two to three times a week by yourself or with others.
- Rest and drink lots of water to counteract our body's dehydration during grief and sorrow.
- Breathe deeply. Consciously take deep breaths throughout the day and evening.
- Scream, wail, moan, sob, laugh hysterically, play music, sing, howl or cry out loud in the shower, on the floor, into a pillow, at the beach, in the woods, out fishing or with a trusted friend.
- Breathing exercises, visualizations, relaxation, stretching, meditation, affirmations and yoga have all been scientifically shown to relieve stress, anxiety and provide positive endorphins to help the body heal.
- Relax in a hot tub, hot bath, shower, sauna, sweat lodge or with a massage and let the emotion seep from your pores and evaporate with the steam.

- ❑ Put together a collage, alter, memory book, picture frame, treasure box, video or audio tape/CD about the person who died or left.
- ❑ Create a memorial, plant a tree, make a donation, volunteer, start an organization or dedicate an event, an action or your life to the loved one who has died. Some men have created organizations or made a point of helping a neighbor, relative or buddy in honor of the person who died.
- ❑ Write, talk, pray, light a candle, burn incense, look at a photo and/or have a conversation with, to or about the person who has passed away. Many people find that talking to the deceased helps soften the effects of their physical absence and supports them in maintaining an ongoing (though different) relationship and connection with the person who has died. Even if it is only for five to ten minutes, take a moment every day in some special place - your favorite corner of a room, in your garden, by the beach, in the redwoods, in a special park, at the graveside or with another person. There is no right or wrong way to do it. How we live with the dead can also reflect and/or mirror how we choose to stay connected to and relate with those who are living.
- ❑ Keep going. Don't give up. There IS a light at the end of the tunnel, even when you're in the depths of darkness. Life changes, feelings change, attitudes change, perceptions change and our understanding and appreciation of life are often awakened in the painful process of mourning.

Don't let this list stop you from finding your own way to act, walk, crawl, run, jump or dance on your unique, individual journey of living as a man with the reality

of loss. You don't have to ignore or try to "get over" grief and mourning by avoiding or suppressing it. Use it as a catalyst, as fertilizer, as an open door for change, growth and transformation. Don't just sit there, *do* something!