



Patterns of Grief in Women and Men

There are common patterns in the ways in which men and women each experience and express grief. Each person is an individual and not everyone fits these patterns. However, it is helpful to understand typical patterns when seeing how family members and friends respond to the death of a loved one. Everyone grieves at his or her own pace, intensity, style, and rhythm. Difficulties can arise when other family members and friends do not react and cope in the same way and this can result in assumptions, misunderstandings, and tension.

Men often process strong feelings through actions and activities. They typically like to fix things, do sports, be physically active and spend time out in nature. They are less likely to verbalize their feelings. Men often choose to deal with their grief alone; they may seek solitude or spend more time with their hobbies away from others. They are often socialized to not cry and not show their emotions. Boys are often conditioned to “be strong and not cry.” Men sometimes express anger in response to their own feelings of sadness. Often boys are told they “need to be the man of the house” when their father dies. Throughout history men have been expected to protect and provide for their families. These societal expectations can put pressure on men who are grieving. How can they protect their family members from the pain of grief? How can they handle their own feelings when they are supposed to be the strong ones who don’t show emotions or “weakness?” How can they be reliable providers when they are distracted by their own grief? Men often respond more cognitively to a loss, emphasizing thinking more than feeling. Men commonly make attempts to figure things out, make plans about what to do going forward, and come up with an explanation that will help them cope. Men often say they want to be “realistic” about the loss and use problem solving strategies to figure out how to cope.

Women tend to talk about their feelings, benefit from “telling the story” more than once, and tend to cry more than men. This can lead to tension after a death in the family, when the men in the family may want to dig into the “to do” list that follows a death and clear out the house and possessions, while women need to tend to their feelings before being ready to do the tasks. Women tend to mobilize and use their support systems more than men; they are more social in their grief. Women are more likely to join bereavement groups and share their feelings and experiences with others. They are more likely to seek individual bereavement counseling as well.

There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Styles of grief can be blended, and a person can have some male and some female coping patterns in his/her grief response. It can help to understand the gender patterns when offering support and when experiencing grief with others. Grief experiences and responses vary from person to person, although many commonalities exist.