



WHEN MEN GRIEVE

In the bestseller, *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, author John Gray explores what most of us seem to have found out – that men and women can be very different from each other. Such differences can be in how they think and process things, how they feel and express feelings, and how they behave and relate socially.

Grief is the combination of all sorts of thoughts, feelings and reactions we experience after a change or loss. The more significant the loss, the deeper the grief responses will probably be. It's not any surprise then, that when it comes to grief it's common for men and women to differ in their responses, just as they do in so many other areas in life.

In fact, it's not uncommon for such differences to cause tension and misunderstanding in relationships. For example, a man's quiet and very private grieving might be misinterpreted and be seen as uncaring and indifferent, when in fact he is anything but.

Here is some general information about men's grief, based on research and feedback from men who've 'been there', as well as some helpful websites and a list of books for those interested in exploring the topic further.

There are many theories explaining gender differences, but at a time of loss it seems especially likely that cultural expectations about male and female roles will have a significant influence on differences. For example, men might be expected to 'be strong' and responsible to support everyone else in the family. Women might be expected to be more easily understand and express her feelings and pain. As a result it can be harder for men to accept or look for support.

Research and feedback indicate that after a big loss, men are more likely to:

- *need more time to process their thoughts and feelings*
- *need more time by themselves - to reflect, master feelings and plan ahead*
- *want privacy to express their deepest emotions*
- *feel their loss deeply but be less able to express the depth of their loss in words*
- *want to talk a lot less about their thoughts and feelings*
- *to find certain aspects of grief to be embarrassing and uncomfortable*
- *be able to express the emotion of anger more readily than other emotions*
- *be more comfortable expressing loss and grief through action, activity, planning and problem solving*
- *attend to the support needs of others before their own needs*
- *be able to move in and out of their grief more readily, largely due to activity distractions*
- *be less willing to seek the support of others (either individually or in a support group)*



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Recent scientific research confirms that there are indeed distinct differences between the male and female brain, both in structure and in the way it is used. For example, it is now known that the left side of the brain houses language skills, while the right side controls spatial problem-solving skills. The connective tissue between the two sides (the *corpus callosum*) tends to be distinctly thinner in males than in females, and this may explain why a man tends to use one side of his brain at a time, while a woman uses both. It can also help explain why a man is less able to verbalise what it is he is feeling. Research has also established that from early puberty a male begins to produce less of the tear-producing hormone *prolactin*, which leaves him physiologically less able to cry.

Neil Chethik, author of the book *Fatherloss*, was involved in a national survey done in the US that asked how men dealt with the loss of their fathers. He wrote this:

"I think that there is a great misunderstanding about how men deal with loss. I found that men grieve but they do it in a way that does not look like grieving. While women seem to grieve more through talking and crying, men grieve through thinking and acting. When we don't have access to tears, we can find others ways to express that energy."

The survey found that most of the men chose to grieve their fathers' death through action, such as continuing their fathers' hobbies. Chethik concluded that while this kind of bereavement process may be slower and more gradual, it does as effectively resolve grief as other more expressive processes. Neither form of grief is better than the other.

Some Helpful Suggestions:

Men who've 'been there' suggest these things to men who are facing loss, pain and grief.

- As you look after others, look after yourself properly too. Eat well, get enough exercise and sleep, don't drink too much and avoid drugs
- Find physical expressions for strong internal feelings, like walking, running, sport, mowing lawns, swimming, a punching bag, gardening, cycling, hammering, building something
- Sit down and tell the people you are closest to you what you need – for example, some time out alone, or to keep feelings private – If this is too hard, write your needs as a list and show them
- Keep communicating with those closest to you – both listening and talking – and ask them what they most need as they grieve too. Think together about ways you can support each other and respect each other's way of grieving



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- Keep in touch with friends – talk to them when you need to, it might actually help more than you think – asking them questions about their life perspectives can be a good starter
- Take time out in nature – it can be very restoring
- Some men find it helpful to undertake a project or ritual to help them get through their grief – for example, creating or planting something in memory of who has been lost, writing a letter that's never posted, but says it all, or keeping a photo or picture nearby
- Make time to relax and tune out – this is as important as anything else you do – try to do it every day

Despite the differences, the stresses of grief remain the same for both men and women, and the need to work through grief is the same. In fact, as many people know, some men grieve in more traditionally "feminine" ways while some women grieve in traditionally "masculine" ways. There are no rules about grieving. It's not a race or a competition. If someone grieves differently from you, it doesn't mean they loved someone less or more than you, or that they're 'better' or 'worse' than you at grieving...

The most important key is to remember that the way we grieve is as individual as we each are.

***However we each get through our loss,
all of us - whatever our gender -
need the respect, understanding and patience of others
to grieve in our own way,
without guilt or disapproval,
for as long as we need to.***

Simon, 38, a bereaved father

Some websites that may be of interest:

www.menweb.org/mengrief.htm

www.menweb.org/mangrief.htm

www.griefworksbc.com/CulturalExpectations.asp

www.menstuff.org/books/byissue/feelings-grief.html