

Loss, Grief, and Manliness: What Every Man Should Know about Losing a Loved One

In the beginning of February 2009, I was just entering my last semester in my Master's program for counseling when after a brief illness, my father died. I had thought of myself as a well put together guy — at the top of my class, with a fiancée and strong prospects for the future, but this put me into a complete tailspin. I swung from fits of intense rage, to depths of deep depression, to cold and distant numbness. What made matters even worse was that I had no clue what was happening to me, and my classmates and mentors, despite being in the counseling field, seemed just as bewildered. What was happening to me was grief, and like many men in our society, I was woefully unprepared for it.

Unfortunately, the death of a loved one is something that everyone will experience at some point in their life. Modern American society, however, does little to prepare us for the inevitable loss of a loved one. We need only look at our TV commercials with their emphasis on staying young and healthy in the hope of living forever to see that we live in a culture that prefers not to think about or even acknowledge the existence of death. This is why when the death of a loved one does occur, many men do not understand the experiences they are having and how grief is affecting them. So in an effort to better understand my own experience and to help my fellow men, I've put together some research on the way men experience and cope with grief.

Symptoms of Grief in Men

Research shows that after a loss men experience greater changes in mood than do women and experience more consequences for their physical health. However, we tend not to associate typical grief symptoms such as sadness and crying, depressed mood, and a sense of hopelessness with men or manliness. While men do experience these "typical" symptoms of grief, they may display less of them. This is due at least in part to the fact that there are a number of symptoms that are common in men but relatively rare in women, giving the male experience of grief a unique character. These symptoms include:

- **Anger:** often directed at someone or something seen as responsible for the loss, but sometimes directed at the self or at nothing in particular.
- **Irritability:** grieving men may be easily irritated and annoyed and may overreact to small annoyances.
- **Withdrawal:** grieving men may withdraw from social contact as well as withdraw emotionally, experiencing an emotional numbness.
- **Rumination:** persistent thinking about the deceased or death in general.
- **Substance Abuse:** grieving men may attempt to cope by abusing alcohol or other drugs.

It's possible for a grieving man to display any and all of the gender specific symptoms described above and relatively few of the typical symptoms. This can cause anxiety in some men because they feel like they're "not grieving enough" or "not grieving the right way" and confusion in those around them who don't understand why the grieving man is reacting the way that he is. However, the way men grieve will vary widely from man to man and what they are experiencing is normal.

The length of the grieving process will also vary widely from man to man. While most HR departments only grant 3 days bereavement leave, if they give it at all, grieving typically takes much

longer. Two months is considered the “standard” length of symptoms after which a person should be evaluated for more serious problems. However, recent research suggests that the process may be much longer and that even well-adjusted men may still have some mild symptoms, such as sadness on the anniversary of the deceased’s passing, as much as twenty years later. The important fact to remember is that every man will grieve at his own pace and should not worry about “being over it by now.”

The degree of symptoms men experience will also vary widely. Research has shown that some men experience resiliency and experience only mild symptoms of grief for a short period, while others experience much stronger symptoms for a longer period. Surprisingly, research shows that the intensity of symptoms is not related to the quality of relationship the grieving person had with the deceased. Men who had a difficult relationship with their wives and fathers were just as likely to experience prolonged and intense grief at their deaths as those that had good relationships with them.

How Men Cope

Now that we have a sense of what grief is like for men, the inevitable question is “What do we do about it?” Most men deal with grief using the same strategies that they use to deal with everything else: by controlling their emotions and relying on their own internal strengths. Men therefore do not respond well when asked to do “grief work” which typically involves talking about the emotions associated with the loss. Research supports this, showing that emotional expression does not lead to reduced grief symptoms in either men or women. However, simply avoiding thinking about the loss is not helpful either. According to research, those who coped with a loss most effectively were those that alternated between “loss oriented coping” which involves thinking about the loss and what it means for the person and “restoration oriented coping” which includes planning for the future and problem solving.

Since men tend to be planners and problem solvers, restoration oriented coping often comes naturally to the grieving man. But a grieving man also needs to address issues and emotions associated with the loss itself. Often these issues will challenge the grieving man’s identity and sense of masculinity. Coming to terms with these challenges, as well as resolving regrets related to the deceased are all part of a man’s long term coping with loss.

While every man’s experience of grief and coping style will vary, there are some things that all men who are grieving have in common and so the following tips are presented for those men who are grieving and those that are trying to help them.

Tips for the Grieving Man

Experience your grief in your own way. As long as you are not harming yourself or others, there is no wrong way to grieve. Grief is a unique experience for every man and the way you grieve may not be what others expect or what you expected for yourself. Permitting yourself to honestly experience grief is an important step towards healing.

Give yourself time to grieve. After the passing of a loved one, there are often many arrangements to be made and others mourners to be supported and cared for. While no man wants to shirk his duty, it is important to allow time for yourself to grieve as well.

Watch out for harmful behaviors. While experiencing anger is normal, it is important to manage that anger so that it doesn't harm others. Also, grieving men are much more likely to develop problems with alcohol or other substances. Their use should be carefully monitored.

Call on your man friends. Other men, especially other men who have had a similar loss, can be some of your strongest sources of support.

Know when to seek help. For most grieving men, psychological counseling may be helpful but is not necessary. However, **if you experience serious thoughts of suicide or self-harm or develop an alcohol or other drug problem, seek psychological care immediately.**

Be there. Simply knowing that you are available to support him has a positive impact on a grieving man. Even if you think it goes without saying, make it a point to tell him that you are available and willing to help.

Listen. A grieving man may or may not want to talk about his experiences. If he does, listen openly. Generally, the less you talk the better. Avoid giving advice or problem solving unless asked.

Allow him to experience his grief his way. Don't set timetables for his grief or expect him to grieve in a certain way. Follow his lead in how you can help.

Take care of yourself. Seeing a friend in the depths of grief is difficult and takes its toll mentally. Make sure to provide for your own care so that you have the energy required to help your friend.

Know when to seek help. Most men will proceed through the grieving process without need for psychological counseling, however, **if your friend threatens or attempts suicide, harms or threatens to harm themselves or others, or develops an alcohol or drug problem, advise them to seek psychological care immediately.**