

Helping a Man Who is Grieving

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Men feel the need to be strong.

Even in the face of tragic loss, many men in our society still feel the need to be self-contained, stoic and to express little or no outward emotion. It is very much in vogue today to encourage men to openly express their feelings, but in practice few men do so. The outward expression of grief is called mourning. All men grieve when someone they love dies, but if they are to heal, they must also mourn.

You can help by offering a "safe place" for your friend to mourn. Tell him you'd like to help. Offer to listen whenever he wants to talk. Don't worry so much about what you will say. Just concentrate on the words that are being shared with you. Let him know that in your presence at least, it's OK for him to express whatever feelings he might have—sadness, anger, guilt, fear. Around you, he doesn't have to be strong because you will offer support without judgment.

Men feel the need to be active.

The grief experience naturally creates a turning inward and slowing down on the part of the mourner, a temporary self-focus that is vital to the ultimate healing process. Yet for many men this is threatening. Masculinity is equated with striving, moving and activity. Many grieving men throw themselves into their work in an attempt to distract themselves from their painful feelings.

Maybe you can offer your friend both activity and time for reflection. Ask him to shoot hoops or play golf. Go for a hike or fishing with your friend. Let him know that you really want to hear how he's doing, how he's feeling. In the context of these activities he just might share some of his innermost thoughts.

Active problem-solving is another common male response to grief. If a father's child dies of SIDS, for example, the father may become actively involved in fundraising for SIDS research. A husband whose wife is killed may focus on the legal circumstances surrounding the death. Such activities can be healing for grieving men and should be encouraged.

Men feel the need to be protectors.

Men are generally thought of as the "protectors" of the family. They typically work to provide their spouses and children with a warm, safe home, safe transportation and good medical care. So when a member of his family dies, the "man of the house" may feel guilty. No matter how out of his control the death was, the man may feel deep down that he has failed at protecting the people in his care.

If your friend expresses such thoughts, you will probably feel the need to reassure him that the death was not his fault. Actually, you may help your friend more by just listening and trying to understand. By allowing him to talk about his feelings of failure, you are helping him to work through these feelings in his own way and his own time.

It's OK for men to grieve differently.

We've said that men feel the need to be strong and active in the face of grief. Such responses are OK as long as your friend isn't avoiding his feelings altogether. It's also OK for men to feel and express rage, to be more cognitive or analytical about the death, to not cry. All of these typically masculine responses to grief may help your friend heal; there is no one "right" way to mourn a death.

Avoid clichés.

Sometimes words, particularly clichés, can be extremely painful for mourners. Clichés are trite comments often intended to provide simple solutions to difficult realities. Men are often told "You'll get over this" or "Don't worry, you and Susie (can) have another child" or "Think about the good times." Comments like these are not constructive. Instead, they hurt because they diminish a very real and very painful loss.

Be aware of holidays and other significant days.

Your friend may have a difficult time during special occasions like holidays and other significant days, such as the birthday of the person who died and the anniversary of the death. These events emphasize the person's absence. Respect this pain as a natural extension of the grief process.

These are appropriate times to visit your friend or write a note or simply give him a quick phone call. Your ongoing support will be appreciated and healing.

Watch for warning signs.

Men who deny and repress their real feelings of grief may suffer serious long-term problems. Among these are:

- chronic depression, withdrawal and low self-esteem
- deterioration in relationships with friends and family
- physical complaints such as headaches, fatigue and backaches
- chronic anxiety, agitation and restlessness
- chemical abuse or dependence
- indifference toward others, insensitivity and workaholism

If you see any of these symptoms in your friend, talk to him about your concern. Find helping resources for him in his community, such as support groups and grief counselors. You can't force your friend to seek help but you can make it easier for him to seek help.

Understand the importance of the loss.

Always remember that the death of someone loved is a shattering experience. As a result of this death, your friend's life is under reconstruction. Consider the significance of the loss and be compassionate and available in the weeks and months to come.

"Helping a friend in grief is a difficult task. Helping a man in grief can be especially difficult, so few friends follow through in their desire to help. I encourage you to stand by your friend during this painful time. Your ongoing presence, patience and support will help him more than you will ever know."