

GRIEF – A MAN’S VIEW

Men, since childhood, have been exposed to a social conditioning process that establishes roles, expectations and conventions which often serve as barriers. These often subtle barriers rob them of the opportunity to grieve in an open public way – an opportunity traditionally given to women. Whether they are also effective in hindering men’s grieving privately is difficult to determine. A brief look at these roles may indicate men’s grieving privately is difficult to determine. A brief look at these roles may indicate how most men have been hindered in their capacity to grieve openly. These comments are general and may apply to individuals in varying ways and varying degrees.

Strong Man Role – typified by such comments as “big boys don’t cry,” “don’t be a sissy,” “be brave” heard during childhood. Television and movies reinforce these comments in adolescence and adulthood. Women who are also subjected to the same conditioning, hold similar expectations of their men. When the bereaved father feels sad what outlets does he have? Does he surrender to the lump in his throat or the tears in his eyes? Probably not, unless he is by himself in a private place. Society accepts men crying at the time of the death and at the funeral, but not long afterwards. Friends “help” the father to maintain this strong man role, by comments like “you are doing well,” “someone has to be strong enough through this whole thing.”

Protector Role – said to be the “natural” role of the father. Because his child has died the man feels he’s a failure in this role. His sense of failure is further reinforced when he can’t protect the rest of his family from the pain of grief now shield them from the effects of his protector role by comments such as “How’s your wife doing?”

Self-sufficient Man Role – a well established role that serves to prevent men from reaching out to others. “If only my husband would get some help, he would feel better” is a comment made by many distraught wives. During his lifetime, he has probably been urged to “stand on your own feet,” “learn to do it by yourself,” which reinforces his need to be seen as self-sufficient. Men generally resist seeking professional help and are often reluctant to come to meetings with other bereaved fathers where feelings may be shared. He is left to struggle through with his own feelings and emotions, and how to express them. He has had little experience in sharing them with his wife and has learned that you don’t share feelings with other men. The results is that men are often barred, not only from openly displaying their emotions, but are also denied the opportunity to explore their own feelings.

Provider Role – the death of the child has occurred, someone has to provide, so father returns to work. He finds that his co-workers treat him differently. They often avoid him; protect him from the normal stress and challenge of the work, which tends to reinforce his sense of failure and his low self-worth. He feels

isolated. He may throw himself into his work, but each evening he returns home where there is the reality of death and grief. At this time, he may start, working overtime, drinking at the club or pub, becoming more involved in service club activities. Such behaviors are judged as the man trying to forget his grief-filled reality of home, to avoid the pain and grief.

But is he really avoiding his grief? He has been told (directly and indirectly) that this is not the best way to deal with things. On the other hand, when the mother spends all her time weeding the garden or is not able to do more than physically keep the rest of the family going, people are understanding that "it's quite a common reaction." Her behavior is not labeled as avoiding grief, but her husband's is.

This double standard may hinder the man in his particular grief. People do not see the man's behavior as a common, natural reaction too. He is said to be selfish and that he doesn't care because he doesn't talk about his child. With such negative value placed on this behavior the man often comes to feel "not OK" with himself and what he is doing. He feels isolated and misunderstood.

Open displays of grief may be helpful and necessary for some people but to expect such behavior of all or even any men may be counter productive to their own way of grieving.

Such unrecognized differences exist in the way men and women grieve that neither parent is able to fully comfort or support the other. Apart from being "empty" themselves, they do not understand the way each needs to grieve. Both may become angry and frustrated with the other, putting strain on the marital relationship during this traumatic period.

We can be supportive by being available to encourage the man to experience and explore his own feelings in a way that feels comfortable, but be honest and direct in our contact with him. We also need to be careful not to burden him with the message that his way is second best. Our understanding, physical presence and listening are what we can offer so that his grief is given time and space to progress in its own individual way.