



when men grieve

Michael Metzger

A man's grief is just as deep, just as acute, just as real and difficult as anyone's. The expression of that grief may differ from man to man, or from a man's to that of a woman. The uniqueness of our grief stems as much from our individual personalities as it does from our relationship with the loved one who has died, or to cultural differences and to changing stereotypes.

There are, however, physiological and anthropological, as well as sociological differences that characterise aspects of masculine grief. Understanding them allows us to better fulfil each other's needs in time of loss.

Men are less likely to express emotion verbally. Differences in brain structure make it harder for men to translate profound or traumatic experiences into words. Instead, in times of crisis, a man's hormones will drive a desire to resolve issues rather than express them emotionally.

Men will generally shed fewer tears. From puberty, men's bodies are hormonally programmed to cry less, despite real pain. Over generations, this has manifested itself as a form of stoicism, the need to appear strong, to be active and resolute – and to grieve privately.

Traditionally, men have felt the need to be protective. Sometimes this means taking control of the situation, but when a loved one dies, control has been taken away. It's easy for a man to feel that somehow he has failed to protect the person he loved or his family and friends. This hurt is now added to the pain of his own loss.

A man expresses his grief in different ways. Out of the need to 'do something' he may become a workaholic or occupy his mind with tasks that take him away from the epicentre of a grieving family. Conversely, he may simply be frozen into immobility and paralysis. Or he may translate that need to be active into a crusade that highlights the life and death of a loved one through building a memorial, or establishing a charitable fund or organisation.

Men who repress or sublimate their grief are often at risk. It is not uncommon for men to become withdrawn and even depressed, frequently leading to deterioration in relationships with family and friends. Heightened anxiety and restlessness can extend to physical complaints – headache, soreness and fatigue. In some cases, alcohol abuse or drug dependence becomes the anaesthetic to dull the pain of a loss unable to find expression.

When men mourn, they turn inwards; when women mourn, they turn outwards.

While this may appear generalised and simplistic, it broadly summarises many of the characteristics that separate the more common expressions of grief between men and women. It should always be remembered that it's okay to express grief differently – and thereby grow towards healing.

Understanding the differences helps us understand ourselves and thereby enables us to have more meaningful and supportive relationships with others, especially in our times of deepest need.

Michael Metzger is a qualified journalist and author of **Towards the Light – Growing through Grief**. Michael spent thirty years as a teacher, lecturer and mentor. The death of his father and that of his son shortly after, fundamentally altered his life.