

Grief Notes

March 2023

Styles of Grief by Linda Hopkins, Bereavement Coordinator

Those of you who have been receiving these letters for a while have read that there is no one, right way to grieve. Unfortunately, our society has for years been so attached to the Five Stages of Grief concept (Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance) that many people have beliefs on how grief should go. The bereaved may be hurt by feeling judged or by judging themselves as not doing it right. People question, “Is it wrong that I have not cried,” or “What’s wrong with them that they are not talking about it. Don’t they need to let it out.”

There are stereotypes of a feminine way of grieving that contrasts with a masculine style. Women are often seen as comfortable with being openly emotional, sharing feelings, and talking about what they are going through. In contrast, men may be expected to be more private and unemotional. These categorizations are common but not helpful in understanding grief as they highlight extremes when it is closer to the truth that we who grieve have elements of both styles. Having grown up in a family of stoic Mainers, I have witnessed that women can be just as apt as men to want to “be strong” and not “break down.”

The work of grief therapist Dr. Kenneth Doka moves away from stereotypes of male vs female grief. Dr. Doka uses the terms Intuitive vs Instrumental grief. Intuitive grieving is full of feelings with emotions such as sadness or anger, often with willingness to share feelings openly with others and to talk about the grief. Instrumental grieving involves thinking and action as the bereaved adjusts to an altered life. That the instrumental griever does not show emotion to others or talk about the grief does not mean that they are not grieving. This type of grief may be one of private thoughts and actions about the problems faced after the death of an important person in their life. It may involve being active rather than showing feelings. Examples include holding events honoring the deceased, planting a tree, creating a memorial bench, and working on practical estate issues. For most of us, there is a blend of both ways of coping.

Those around the instrumental griever often think they need to fix them by getting them to talk and share their feelings. Those uncomfortable with the emotions of intuitive grievers similarly think they need to help them by suggesting a support group or counselor. It is hard when someone is grieving to know what to do. Many people are helped by support groups and counselors. Many are also helped by being allowed to grieve in their own way and by having people in their lives who are present, listening, not judging, and not directing. It can be hard to be with someone who is grieving and to believe that walking beside them in their grief and allowing their process to unfold is a very supportive thing to do.

