



# *Family and Caregiver Education*

## BEREAVEMENT

### **Understanding Different Grieving Patterns in Your Family**

#### **Grief is a Family Affair**

When one member of a family dies, the entire family is affected, as each person grieves their own personal loss in their own unique way. Roles and responsibilities shift; relationships change; communication and mutual support among family members may suffer. Over time, the family must identify what the roles and functions of the lost member were, decide whose job it will be to execute those duties now and learn how to compensate for their absence.

Men, women and children are very different from one another, not just in personality patterns that affect how they think, feel and behave, but also in how they grieve. When someone dies, they will not experience or express their reactions in the same way. Failure to understand and accept these different ways of grieving can result in hurt feelings and conflict between partners and among family members during a very difficult time.

#### **Differences in Personality**

Differing personality patterns among family members will affect how each one individually expresses, experiences and deals with grief. While we all have the capacity to think and to feel, personality research shows that typically a person trusts and prefers one pattern of response over the other.

*Thinkers* experience and speak of their grief intellectually and physically. They are most comfortable with seeking accurate information, analyzing facts, making informed decisions and taking action to solve problems. Remaining strong, dispassionate and detached in the face of powerful emotions, they may speak of their grief in an intellectual way, thus appearing to others as cold and uncaring, or as having no feelings at all.

*Feelers* experience a full, rich range of emotions in response to grief. Comfortable with strong emotions and tears, they are sensitive to their own feelings and to the feelings of others, as well. Since they feel strong emotions so deeply, they're less able to rationalize and intellectualize the pain of grief, and more likely to appear overwhelmed and devastated by it.

Still others may experience profound grief and have very strong feelings about it, but for one reason or another are unable or unwilling to express it. Such individuals are more likely to

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turn to drugs or alcohol in an effort to numb the pain of loss, or to lower their inhibitions so they can let loose their emotions.

### **Gender Differences**

In general, when men suffer the loss of a loved one, they tend to put their feelings into action, experiencing their grief physically rather than emotionally. They deal with their loss by focusing on goal-oriented activities which activate thinking, doing and acting. Rather than endlessly talking about or crying over the person who died, for example, a man may throw himself into time-limited tasks such as planting a memorial garden or writing a poem or a eulogy. Such activities give a man not only a sense of potency and accomplishment as he enters his grief, but also a means of escaping it when the task is done. If a man relates the details of his loss to his closest male friends, it's likely to be around activities like hunting, fishing, sporting events and card games. Although a man may let himself cry in his grief, he'll usually do it alone, in secret or in the dark, which may lead some to conclude that he must not be grieving at all.

Women, on the other hand, have been socialized to be more open with their feelings. They may feel a greater need to talk with others who are comfortable with strong emotions and willing to listen without judgment. Unfortunately, while it may be more acceptable for women in our culture to be expressive and emotional, all too often in grief, they're criticized for being too sentimental or overly sensitive.

### **Grieving in Children**

Children grieve just as deeply as adults, but depending on their cognitive and emotional development, they will experience and express their grief differently from the grownups around them. Their response will depend on the knowledge and skills available to them at the time of the loss. More than anything else, children need their parents to be honest with them. They need accurate, factual information; freedom to ask questions and express their feelings; inclusion in decisions, discussions and family commemorative rituals; stable, consistent attention from their caretakers and time to explore and come to terms with the meaning of their loss.

### **Allowing for Individual Differences**

The way we grieve is as individual as we are, and our own gender biases may influence how we “read” another gender's grieving. Some females are *thinkers* who grieve in traditionally “masculine” ways, and some males are *feelers* who will grieve in traditionally “feminine” ways. Regardless of differences in personality, gender and age, however, the pressures of grief are still present for all family members, and the tasks of mourning are the same: to confront, endure and work through the emotional effects of the death so the loss can be dealt with successfully. Grief must be expressed and released in order to be resolved, and all family members need encouragement to identify and release emotions, to talk about and share their thoughts, and to accept help and support from others.

—Adapted from *Finding Your Way through Grief: A Guide for the First Year*

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