

MEN'S GRIEF

Psychotherapist Tom Golden of Kensington, MD, says grief is like manure: "If you spread it out, it fertilizes; if you leave it in a big pile, it smells like hell."

Golden notes that men and women cope with that pile of manure differently. Men tend to be more concerned with action than interaction. They want to be independent, and often lack the support system available to women. Golden says that a grieving mother probably has to cry and talk with close friends and family, while a grieving father has to "do something," such as create a personal book about the child, start a scholarship fund to honor the child, or raise money for one of the child's special interests.

Golden says men and women tend to be suspicious of each other's mode of grief. The man may think she is "overdoing it" when she emotes, while she may think he is not really grieving, because he grieves in private or through action. Both styles work, and both should be respected.

The co-founder of a Compassionate Friends chapter in Seattle, William Schatz, points out that grieving men may appear cold, irritable, angry, or depressed. They cannot talk easily about their pain, and are constrained by society's "macho" image that men don't cry. Men want to be self-sufficient problem solvers and controllers. Schatz urges grieving men to back off on activities, talk about their feelings, let themselves cry, find a support system, and express anger constructively by exercising or doing yard work.

Over the past five years I have had a number of male clients at Haven. Each has had a different style and pace of grieving, but I see certain common threads that seem to recur.

One man who had lived and worked with his wife for 35 years before her death was extremely crushed by her loss, but became active in a widowed persons' group and remarried within three months. Another man at three months after bereavement could still not bring himself to part with his late wife's clothes and partially drunk soft drink in the refrigerator.

One man's fiancée was killed in a riding accident, in which he suspected foul play. He was consumed by anger and frustration. Another man's son died from a brain tumor at age five, leaving the father feeling guilty and helpless. Another man, diagnosed with a terminal brain tumor, was worried about what would happen to his teenage children after his death. Another man did not feel comfortable going ahead with plans to divorce his wife because she had a terminal disease. He felt she was complicating his plans for remarriage.

Most of my clients appreciate my reassurance that it is okay to cry, and that there is no magic wand to make the pain go away. I describe to them the stages of grief, stressing that they may not experience all of them, or they may seem to experience all in a single day. I tell them they must feel like they have fallen from a five-story building, and broken every bone in their body, so healing will take time. I stress that reconstruction of their lives will not be a neat linear progression, and that they are likely to have ups and downs, with certain events or memories that trigger sharp pain.

Some clients respond to the exercise of listing the departed person's strengths and weaknesses, and putting their thoughts about unfinished business in a letter to the deceased. Others cannot bring themselves to do this, even after six months or a year.

To all, I stress that I am there for them as long as they need someone to talk to. Haven is willing and able to help them "spread the manure."