

Men's grief is often complicated by culture
by Lloyd Robertson

Grieving is about reweaving our "life web". It takes time to acknowledge the broken strand that represents the missing person and to shift other strands until we are ready, emotionally, to carry on with our lives. During our grieving we may experience a range of emotions including rage, guilt, remorse, sadness, depression, numbness and pain. Men's grieving is often complicated by the cultural expectations we place on ourselves.

All men grieve when someone they love dies. Yet men are supposed to be strong. As a result, many men learn to express little or no outward emotion. Yet, the expression of these emotions is part of our healing. Even tho it is now common to encourage men to openly express their emotions, it is still true that most men have difficulty doing so. As a result, the length of time it takes to grieve may be lengthened.

Men need to know that it is safe to openly grieve. A man may be afraid of the power of his emotions. Such men can be aided by having a special safe place where they can vent knowing that they do not have to be strong in such a place and that they will meet understanding without being judged.

Many men hide their grief thru activity. It is still a common cultural belief that men are supposed to be the breadwinners. Men are supposed to be ambitious, are supposed to "get ahead". Some men, therefore, throw themselves into their work as a way of distracting themselves from the emotions of grieving. Yet grieving is a process of turning inward. By avoiding the process men also avoid healing. They remain "walking wounded" and may even turn to drugs and alcohol, when they are not working, as a way of continuing to avoid their pain, and their healing.

Such men should be encouraged to slow down. Fishing is a good, slow moving activity that allows one time to reflect. Other activities such as golf also work. Often male workaholics, engaged in such a relaxing activity, when invited to talk about a painful loss, will "spill forth" in a way that surprises themselves. Often the result is that they feel better about their loss, and themselves.

Altho guilt is a common emotion to all grieverers, men have a special reason for feeling guilty. Men, culturally, often see themselves as protectors. They may feel that they should have done something, that it was their job to prevent the loss. Such men may quietly carry a burden of guilt around with them for a long time.

Most grieverers feel guilt is not because they are actually guilty of something but because grieving involves a full range of negative emotions. Once we select an emotion such as guilt then our neocortex, or thinking part of our brain, tries to find a reason for that emotion. Men need to realize that the guilt they sometimes feel is there because of the feeling of loss and that there is nothing they could have reasonably done.

Men who engage in complicated grieving often withdraw from social contact. Often they do not enjoy activities that used to bring them pleasure. They may be devoid of emotion, something

psychologists call "flatness of affect". They may suffer new physical complaints such as headaches, backaches or stomach problems. They may be tired most of the time and may complain of sleep difficulties. They may abuse alcohol or drugs to excess.

Be supportive if you are a friend of such a person. Spend time with him. Invite him to engage in social activities. Find a place where he can feel it is safe to talk but do not pressure him to do so. Avoid cliches but understand the importance of the loss. Most of all, give the gift of presence.