

Grief and Gender

Intuitive and Instrumental Grief



A member of NorthStar Care Community

Understanding Grief

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We are usually pretty hesitant to even hint at categorizing, labeling, or classifying grief. There are so many different grief responses that can and should be considered 'normal' and no two people will have the exact same feelings and experiences after a death—not even those from the same family, region, religion, or culture. All that being said, there is merit in examining how those with similar traits typically view and interact with the world, as long as we do it with a grain of salt.

We don't always think of gender as complicated because we sometimes confuse it with 'sex', which refers to our biological makeup and determines what box we check at the DMV. Gender is not actually a matter of fact, as psychologist Dr. Stephanie Shields of Pennsylvania State University notes: "...gender is something that one practices (in nearly every sense of the word), rather than only what one inflexibly is." Societies, cultures, and even families have differing views on what it means to be prototypically male or female, and it is rare that real-life individuals ever fit perfectly into these molds.

Today, we want to start talking about grief and gender. However, our goal is to simply point out where similarities and differences might lie. In conceptualizing grief and gender, we want you to always remember these things exist on a continuum. Please keep in mind, we're not stating facts about men and women. There is no way we can tell you how your brother or mother or best friend will respond to grief solely based on gender.

Although men are often thought of as "less emotional," I think it's important to quickly discredit the notion that men don't feel the same intense grief emotions as women. Prominent grief researcher, Kenneth Doka, and his colleague, Terry Martin, have already served up a heaping bowlful of food for thought on this topic in their book *Grieving Beyond Gender*. In this book, they outline different grieving styles that they associate with being characteristically "masculine" or "feminine", although they note that these styles exist on a continuum and that gender is merely a contributing factor.

Intuitive Grief

In general, our culture has come to expect people to grieve in an emotional

way, which is characteristically more female. It is easy to put things like tears and sadness into the context of grief and when we see them we say: "Ah yes, this person is grieving appropriately."

Doka and Martin associate this type of grieving with the intuitive grieving style. Intuitive grief is experienced mainly in terms of feelings and emotions (e.g., "I felt sad" or "I felt angry") and the grief response is usually focused on exploring and expressing these emotions (e.g., "I cried all night" or "I got so mad I couldn't think").

Intuitive Grief

based on work by Terry Martin & Kenneth Doka



- * Grief is experienced as waves of emotion.
- * Grief expression mirrors inner feelings and emotions.
- * More feeling than thinking
- * Focused on exploring and expressing feelings and processing emotions.
- * More "feminine" way of grieving.

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Instrumental Grief

However, not everyone likes to get up close and personal with their feelings. So, although people may experience the same type of emotions, some people might feel and express them differently. Doka and Martin associate this type of grieving with the instrumental grieving style.

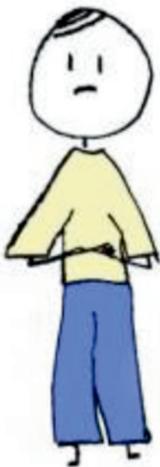
Instrumental grief is experienced in more physical and cognitive ways (e.g., "I couldn't stop thinking about what happened" or "I felt like I couldn't breathe") and the grief response is expressed in physical, cognitive, or behavioral ways and looks more like 'doing' or 'taking action'.

Although instrumental grievers might not see a direct correlation between their feelings and their response, if asked what they "did" in response to their loss as opposed to what they "felt," they might say things like they spoke about the person a lot, created a lasting memorial, immediately found ways to further their loved one's legacy, or they got involved in charity or activism in their loved one's memory. This type of grief expression can be a bit more difficult for outsiders to discern. Others might worry the person isn't dealing with their emotions when, in reality, they are just dealing with them differently.

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Instrumental Grief

based on work by Terry Martin & Kenneth Doka



- * Grief is experienced in more physical or cognitive ways
- * Grief is expressed in more physical, cognitive or behavioral ways
- * More thinking than feeling
- * Focused on doing and actively responding to grief
- * More “masculine” way of grieving

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So what does this have to do with gender?

Doka and Martin are in no way saying that men grieve instrumentally and women grieve intuitively. Remember that continuum we mentioned? Well, these theorists say that most of us fall somewhere along the continuum between intuitive and instrumental grief. They call this a **blended experience**. People who fall on this continuum borrow coping tools from both ends of the spectrum.

Now, when it comes to gender, there are a lot of societal, cultural, and personal expectations telling us how we should feel and react: Men should be strong and stoic, while women should be emotional and sensitive. These assumptions are really unhelpful because a lot of the time they don’t fit, yet we might feel ashamed, **guilty**, or weak for not feeling or acting our part.



Dissonant Grief

According to Martin and Doka, dissonant grief emerges when the way someone's grief is naturally experienced and expressed clashes with what they think is expected and acceptable. Confusion, shame, and repression can emerge when someone who is typically "strong" or unemotional becomes overwhelmed by emotion, or when someone who expects to be flooded with feelings finds that they aren't.

Martin and Doka represent just one perspective on how gender-related characteristics can impact grief, but I think their theory encourages us to consider the complex ways in which gender can influence grief while being mindful that there is immense variability in what gender actually means on an individual level. It is important as people who are grieving or as friends, family, and support workers, to be open to a range of grief responses regardless of our expectations.