

Women, men and grief

Women and men may have learned to cope with grief in different ways and this can put additional strain on a relationship when a couple face bereavement. By understanding these differences, you can begin to achieve balance with your partner and within yourself.

Grief is solitary. Even when other people are grieving for the same person, each person is ultimately alone. If you are in a couple, you may suddenly find it difficult to communicate with your partner, to express your feelings and to understand each other's behaviour.

Each person will be impacted by grief in a different way, depending on the relationship that they had with the person who died, their personality, culture, and upbringing. Everyone is individual but research does suggest that there are some differences in how men and women are likely to respond.

A woman's grief

A mother's response to the death of a child is likely to be different from a father's response. Women tend to be loss-oriented and are very much concerned with their feelings. They want to focus on their loss by remembering; wanting to look at photographs and to talk about their child. They have a need to express and share their emotions, to cry and to be sad.

My partner cannot talk about our child or look at photos. I want to and need to.

Bereaved mother

A man's grief

In contrast, men often want to return to normality as soon as possible. They tend to want to look to the future, plan and move forward. Traditionally, parents in western society do not encourage males to express feelings; men instinctively suppress them, try to be strong and to function as if nothing has happened. This response may be misinterpreted as uncaring towards both their partner and the person who has died, they just have a different way of dealing with it.

We reacted so differently that I thought I had lost her too.

Bereaved father

Understanding differences

Given how different these responses can be, there is potential for real misunderstanding, and each partner often needs help in understanding things from the other's perspective. It might help to remember that you are both grieving but expressing it in different ways.

Women need help to start looking at the future - to move on from the intensity of the pain - and men need help so they can face up to and explore their painful feelings.

These different responses mirror how we grieve as individuals. We move between focusing on the person who has died, our need to express our emotions and grieve, and our desire to find respite from grieving and get on with living. Children naturally shift between the two, moving in and out of their feelings with much more fluidity and speed than adults.

Communication is the key

There is very little doubt that the key to a relationship successfully surviving such a loss is to keep talking. This holds true whether only one of you is grieving, or both of you. It helps not to evaluate or judge what the other person is saying or doing, but instead, try to see things through their eyes. In understanding and being understood, you can increase the depth of your relationship. Set aside time to talk to each other when you will not be disturbed. You do not need a huge amount of time, but create regular slots when you can listen to each other.

Bereavement support or counselling can offer time as a couple, with someone whose job it is to listen and who has the training and experience to begin to help you share with each other. Child Bereavement UK's website can provide information on finding bereavement support or a counsellor in your local area.

Getting physical

Some couples seek comfort in getting close physically, either through making love or just holding each other. Others may find it hard to bear any physical contact at all. Difficulties can arise when needs are different. Men may often try to show their love for their partner through sex. A woman may find this insensitive, especially after a baby or child has died and particularly if she fears a further pregnancy. This can lead to mutual rejection, with the woman holding all physical contact at bay for fear it might lead to sex. The couple can grow further and further apart as they become more isolated from and resentful towards each other.

No rules

There are no rules about who does what most effectively. Often the man handles the practical arrangements after the death. It may help to share roles so that neither of you feels overburdened. If you are happy defining distinct roles it can be helpful to spend time letting each other know what you are doing, how it felt and so on. When you are both grieving, it can be particularly difficult to find the emotional resources to help each other because you are tied up with just getting yourself through the day. Recognise this and try to be realistic in your expectations of yourself and your partner. Over time, couples can work together to support each other.

I cannot imagine these years without my husband's support. He has held me and the children up... and when he just couldn't do it any longer, I found I was able to take over for a while.'

Bereaved mother