

How Do You Experience Your Grief?

By Isa Jennings

(From: Martin, T and K.J. Doka (Men don't cry, Women do) and Laura Andersen (About Living with Grief) and our experiences from 21 years of doing grief groups

In the field of grief the predominant theory used to be that in order to process and heal grief one needs to express the feelings, including crying and talking about one's feelings. Anybody who did not do this, was "stuffing" or avoiding the feelings and thus creating more emotional or even physical problems later on in life. This thinking has dramatically changed. We now define this as one grief-style: "Intuitive".

If you are an intuitive griever, you experience crying and talking about your feelings to people, who will respond compassionately and non-judgmental, as helpful. Sharing your feelings as well as being supportive of others often are very healing. You feel your feelings intensely, you may go through prolonged periods of confusion, disorientation, disorganization and an inability to concentrate. The result is often physical exhaustion and/or anxiety. As one of the mothers in the caregiver support group said after sharing her concerns for her children's wellbeing and having tears stream down her face for most of the group time: "Thank you for having a place where I can just cry for an hour!" A dad shared that after commenting to his Dad that he never cried, his Dad answered: "How do you know that? I cry all the time – I just do it in privacy." Here our cultural norm that men don't cry perhaps imposes a need for privacy in order to express one's natural grief style. The children and youth in our groups who are intuitive grievers sometimes feel scared by the intensity of their feelings. It's a little like the contractions during childbirth: if you can relax into them, let them flow through you, instead of fighting it, you learn you can ride them out and the process becomes smoother, although not less painful. Knowing there is nothing wrong with them and feeling your confidence in them that they can make it through this, lifts a big burden off these kids. If you are an intuitive griever and you are not allowed to (or don't allow yourself to) and you are not supported in expressing your grief as described above, then your grief remains unprocessed.

The other grief-style is called "Instrumental". If you are an instrumental griever, your grief tends to be private, thought- and action orientated and future-focused. You concentrate on doing: problem solving, decision making, organizing, planning, physical or creative activities. You probably seek to honor your loved one by doing something practical: coordinate the memorial service, join an activity that helps others or that perhaps works towards preventing the type of death your loved one died by. Feelings are not experienced as intensely. Talking about feelings is not experienced as helpful, whereas doing something that helps adjusting to the new normal is. The instrumental griever may experience brief periods of confusion, forgetfulness and/or obsessiveness. Energy levels tend to be enhanced, but the general arousal goes unnoticed. To expect and pressure instrumental grievers to express intense feelings is as unhealthy and unhelpful to them as when intuitive grievers are not given the opportunity to do

so. For example an elementary age boy, whose Dad had died in an accident and who had been very involved with him in sports, would not talk about feelings in the group. He talked about how he continues to play sports, how that had become even more important to him after the death, how he feels connected to his Dad when he practices, that every time he is on the field or court he plays in his honor. A dad, whose 5 year old son died by drowning, joined a search and rescue organization, so that other families might not have to experience what he did. A teen girl at camp, whose mom died of cancer, did not express much of her feelings, but spent every day time in the music room, where she wrote a song about her mother and their life together. At the last night at camp she sang it at campfire to the whole camp.

Neither of these griefs-styles are better or worse – they are just different. Furthermore, you can regard them as opposite extremes on a continuum and most of us find ourselves somewhere on this continuum with a mix of both styles. When members in the same family or friendship circle have very different styles, misunderstandings, judgements and worries easily arise. Each often feels there is something wrong with the other. Grief is hard enough as it is. My hope is, that this information will aide in families and friends understanding each other better at a time, when they need each other the most.