Men, Women, and Loss: Changing Perspectives on Gender and Grief

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Kenneth J. Doka

Gender influences the way we experience, express, and adapt to grief. In years past, gender was thought to be a primary determinant in how we experience grief. Today, researchers and practitioners recognize that gender is only one of many factors that influence how we grieve.

Corr, Nabe, and Corr (2009) note three distinct perspectives regarding the relationship between grief and gender. The first perspective, labeled the feminization of grief, stressed that expressing emotion and seeking social support is critical to effectively cope with loss. This focus on affective expression was generic to the counseling field. Sue and Sue (2008) criticize this bias toward emotional disclosure and claim that it has inhibited work with cultural groups that value emotional control and restraint. Additionally, much of the early research on grief was based on widows—hence their modes of dealing with loss were often perceived as a normative standard. Staudacher (1991), for example, asserted that “there is only one way to grieve” that is, “only by experiencing the necessary emotional effects of your loved one’s death” (p. 3). Using this perspective, men are seen to have difficulties in coping with grief. “This does not mean that men are not grieving; it does indicate that they may not accomplish the task as successfully as women” (LeGrand, 1986, p. 31).

A second perspective proposed that men have their own distinct patterns of grief. These patterns emphasize mental, active, and problem-solving approaches to grief. With this perspective, men might show more limited and muted emotional responses to loss, such as anger or guilt. Men were thought to value self-reliance and solitude in coping with loss. While men had a different experience of grief, their methods of coping were seen as no less effective than those of women. It was recognized, then, that counseling interventions should not
challenge men’s way of coping, but rather should find ways to deal with loss congruent with masculine inclinations. This perspective of men’s grief often drew from anthropological sources that ritualized gender differences in grief as well as literature that emphasized biological differences between the genders (Golden, 1996; Lund, 2000).

Martin and Doka’s early work (1996, 1998) began to transition to a perspective less focused on gender. They described a *masculine* and *feminine* pattern of grief. With the masculine pattern, individuals often exhibit more mental and active responses toward grief. In the feminine pattern, the experience and expression of grief was more emotive and expressive. By describing masculine and feminine patterns, Martin and Doka were beginning to move away from the idea that grief responses were inextricably linked to gender. From this perspective, while men were more likely to experience a masculine pattern of grief, gender was only one factor among others that determined grieving patterns.

Later work by Martin and Doka (2000) completed the transition to a third perspective that placed even less value on gender as a critical determinant for how people grieve. They proposed a continuum of grieving styles from an *intuitive* style, where grief is experienced and expressed in more affective ways, to an *instrumental* style, where grief is experienced in more physical and mental reactions and expressed in more active modes. This perspective posits a number of influences that affect the grieving style of individuals, including culture, gender, socialization experiences, birth order, and temperament, among other factors. The critical point is that gender influences, but does not *determine*, grieving styles. Both men and women may, based on their different experiences and cultural backgrounds, exhibit either style. With this model, gender-based terminology is no longer used to describe the different ways individuals grieve. This perspective fits well with current attitudes that move away from seeking universal reactions to a more nuanced understanding of the individual pathways of grief.
REFERENCES


