



United in the Journey

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Guilt and Freedom

Men and Grief: It Only Takes One Thing

by Dr. Owen E. Tucker

Grief is hard work! It depletes your energy, saps your spirit, reduces your ability to concentrate, gets in the way of your capacity to make decisions, and often lasts much longer than you expect.

But still you have to deal with it. Why? Because grief helps you heal! In fact, it is only by grieving that you can heal. An athlete who has been injured in the game must do his “work-outs” if he wants to heal and get back in the game. So you must do your “grief work” if you want to get back into the game of life healed and whole. That’s the simple truth of the matter. Often doing the work-outs is not easy for the athlete – it takes grit. And just as often doing one’s grief work is not easy – it takes **courage!**

Grief is especially hard work for men! There are specific reasons for this and almost all of those reasons result from the fact that men are different from women in some very important ways when it comes to grief.

First, there are some physical differences that are a part of a man’s make-up from the moment he’s born. A man’s brain is designed a little differently from that of a woman’s. The corpus callosum, that passageway which runs between the two halves of the brain, is often smaller in men and may contain fewer neural connectors than a woman’s brain. One theory is that this can limit how quickly and easily a man can process information back and forth between his brain’s left and right hemispheres. That’s especially important when it comes to grief, because one side of the brain specializes in processing emotions and the other side in processing thoughts. According to this theory, men may be at a physical disadvantage when it comes to having quick verbal access to their emotions.

Another difference relates to the hormone prolactin which is produced by the pituitary gland. Prolactin is important in the formation of tears – without a good supply of this hormone it’s more difficult to cry. Males begin to produce significantly less prolactin once they’ve reached puberty. To a degree, men are programmed by their bodies to cry less.

Still another variable involves serotonin, a chemical produced by the human brain which influences moods. A deficit of serotonin can result in a number of problems, including depression. Recent studies have shown that men tend to produce serotonin faster than women. Consequently, for physical reasons alone, men may be less susceptible to the heavy depression that sometimes accompanies grief.

Second, there are different expectations for men in our culture than for women. Our culture has created an idealized image of what it means to be a man. He is strong and confident. First he thinks things through, then he forges ahead to do whatever the circumstances call for. He’s cool and calm under pressure. Mostly he is independent – he relies not so much on others as on himself.

For centuries – in fact, almost since the beginning of time – three important human functions have come to define men’s relationships

- **He’s a protector** – he watches out for other people’s safety and well-being, especially those he loves: spouse, partners, children, parents, close friends.
- **He’s a provider** – he supplies food, clothing, and shelter for his family, as well as other amenities they require and deserve.
- **He’s self-reliant** – he should be able to “do it himself” whether “it” is building something, fixing something, finding his way.

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Our memories can be amazing gifts. Each of us has memories of personal events and experiences. Some memories are awe-inspiring while others are awful. I have learned that the “awful” events and experiences within my personal memory are also a gift. Too often, I have buried the “awful” memories deep in my subconscious trying to avoid emotional pain. I found that I not only continued to experience the pain, but the memory also controlled my behaviors.

Choosing to remember and experience even the awful events transferred the power from the memory to my control. Sometimes painful events and memories surface that I have long forgotten. Instead of trying to suppress those memories, I now choose to remember them and re-experience the emotions that are stirred up.

Perhaps you can benefit, as I have, from choosing to remember some painful events. I use a five-fold process for remembering. First, I write the event down. Secondly, I write how I felt and how I feel now about the event or experience. Next, I try to write how I understand the experience has controlled and dominated my life. Then, I write down something like, “that was then, this is a new day. I am not the same person that I was then. I am letting go of the pain in this memory and taking control of my life.” Finally, I burn the paper that I wrote on. You might choose to talk with someone or use some other process, but you can learn how to live with your memories. Blessings and Peace to each of you. Connie K. Graham, Chaplain

Mother’s Day *MAY*hem

Mother’s Day gets almost as much attention as the December holiday season. Advertisements, movies, sermons, and TV segments bombard us and force us to face honoring or remembering our mothers. For those whose mothers have died, it is one more hurdle to overcome in living without the mother who lived up to the Hallmark card, or the mother who did not. Hope Edelman in Motherless Daughters writes “... mother represents comfort and security no matter what our age (p.xxiii).”

Our western culture deifies the perfect mother who exists only in our minds as we remember her as someone who met all our needs, listened with unending patience, and imparted wisdom which never failed. Often the real tragedy in the death of one’s mother is that she will never have a chance to live up to our unfulfilled imaginings of how she could have been. We are left with the reality of who she was and the grief of who she could never be.

Motherhood is about creativity, both of the person and the reality of our female gender possibilities. For male and female alike, the connection to the one who gives us birth effects who we become. And whether we have known our birth or adoptive mother or not, her loss will be felt at every time of creativity and crossroads where we long for the mother we had or the mother we wished we had. That pressure of who she “should” have been often complicates our grief.

We find meaning through our losses in understanding the reality of the loss and making new meaning for our lives from what we learn. And when it comes to mother loss, the questions range from: who was she, how and when did she die, did you have time to say what you needed, and did you find the comfort and security you needed somewhere. The experts say parents give roots and wings to their children. Mother stories abound where roots are tied with guilt and wings are clipped by a mother’s fears or attempts to protect her child. Our grief is inextricably tangled with the roots and wings we experienced. So how do you remember your mother and make peace with who she was?

Be honest. You aren’t perfect and neither was she. Resist the urge to use Hallmark or perfection as the standard by which you measure the one you called mother. Hold onto the good memories and work to let the negative images recede as you can. Honor your grief with the time that honors the relationship. Find someone to parent to make up for, or honor the one whom you called mother. Search for the freedom that comes with making peace with your memories and your mother.

Travel Log: Tribute to George and Gracie

by Sandra Haley

Whenever the names, George and Gracie are mentioned, if you are of a certain generation, you automatically think of George Burns and Gracie Allen, the comedy duo who always ended their act with George turning to Gracie and saying, "Say good-night, Gracie". Gracie always responded by saying, "Goodnight, Gracie." It was comforting. You could count on it.

When I expanded my menagerie to include two peach-faced love birds, I searched for famous couple's names for them. I thought of Romeo and Juliet...no. I thought of Tristan and Isolde...no. Then my sister, who was and still is, a big George Burns fan, came up with George and Gracie. Perfect. Two funny little beings who bickered with each other constantly and whose antics could make me laugh, even on the grayest of days. So George and Gracie it was.

George and Gracie entertained me for hours. You may have heard that you can buy an expensive toy for a child and he'll put the toy aside and play with the box. George and Gracie loved having an empty cardboard container, such as an oatmeal box with a hole cut in one end, so they could climb in and out. They would play for hours with the container.

George and Gracie also loved to travel, going to the mountains with us (the cat, Kitty, and the dog, Runi (pronounced Roonie, not Runny). They loved to listen to music while we traveled, especially Barry Manilow and would happily sing along.

While we were in residence at our beloved cabin in the mountains, weather permitting, I would put George and Gracie's cage on the porch, so they could enjoy the mountain habitat with us. Sadly, George and Gracie flew the coop on our last trip to the mountains. Stridently, joyfully singing to the top of their lungs, flying into the wild blue yonder. I could hear them all afternoon as they soared. Then I heard them no more.

I left their cage with the door open outside, so they could see it from the air hoping that they might return before we left our mountain paradise for the return trip to Macon. But it was not to be. Hopefully, George and Gracie are still enjoying their taste of freedom. If it was George and Gracie's fate to perish as a result of their race to freedom, I find comfort in knowing they experienced unbearable joy in their last hours. I keep thinking of the song, "His Eye is on the Sparrow". Surely, His eye is on George and Gracie too.

What I Learned From My Mother

BY TED KOOSER, U.S. POET LAUREATE

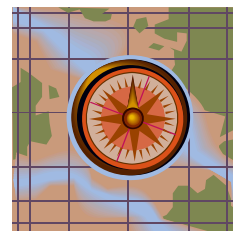
I learned from my mother how to love the living, to have plenty of vases on hand in case you have to rush to the hospital with peonies cut from the lawn, black ants still stuck to the buds. I learned to save jars large enough to hold fruit salad for a whole grieving household, to cube home-canned pears and peaches, to slice through maroon grape skins and flick out the sexual seeds with a knife point.

I learned to attend viewing even if I didn't know the deceased, to press the moist hands of the living, to look in their eyes and offer sympathy, as though I understood loss even then.

I learned that whatever we say means nothing, what anyone will remember is that we came.

I learned to believe I had the power to ease awful pains materially like an angel. Like a doctor, I learned to create from another's suffering my own usefulness, and once you know how to do this, you can never refuse.

To every house you enter, you must offer healing: a chocolate cake you baked yourself, the blessing of your voice, your chaste touch.



**Looking
for
Direction?**
Great quotes about grief

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Men and Grief continued

In many ways, grief asks the opposite of a man than what may commonly be expected of him. Grief makes it hard for a man to appear cool, calm, and collected because it can sweep over him when he least expects it.

- It can diminish his ability to protect others if he's experiencing his own powerful emotions, so he has to stay strong.
- It can diminish his ability to provide something others may need in their time of grief and sadness, so he has to be prepared to do something for them.
- It can diminish his sense of self-reliance if he reaches out to others for help – “needing help” may be seen as “being weak.”

If a man takes his cultural roles seriously, he is likely to concentrate on the emotions of others, rather than his own emotions. Often men sense that the public display of their emotions can cause concern or discomfort for those who aren't used to seeing them. And, in fact, men can often feel shame for shedding tears or showing emotional distress when others are around. The plain fact is that men's pain has become a taboo in our culture! There is only one place in our culture where a man's emotions are easily accepted in public – in the sports arena.

No wonder men often value their aloneness when a serious loss occurs. A man may tend to believe that the resulting grief is a burden that is his alone to bear, that it would be unfair to expect others to shoulder it for him.

Third, there are personal differences that determine how a man responds to grief. When it comes to men and their grief, a lack of expression is not necessarily a lack of feelings. Never judge a man by the number of tears he sheds or the number of words he uses. His heartfelt expression may take other forms.

What is the secret to understanding a man response to grief? Whereas women *generally* are inclined to look for relationships and interaction; men *generally* are more inclined to take pride in making their own way and in being self-reliant. So, in doing his “grief work,” a man needs to look for what is his *natural disposition*.

- *Some men express their grief in a cognitive, problem-solving way.* Emphasizing thinking more than feeling, they try to figure things out, consider things logically, and come up with an explanation that makes sense or a plan that will help them deal with what has happened. Then they are ready to take concrete steps to solve the problem and rectify the situation as much as they're able. They want to be “realistic” about what happened so they can be clear about what they're to do from this point on. These men may read all they can about what they are facing, or write their thoughts in a journal, or spend hours in the library.
- *Some men take a practical, hands-on way of responding to grief.* They may volunteer their services, donate or raise funds, build or repair things that help others, or raise people's consciousness about an issue related to their loss. They tie the action they take to the grief they feel, believing that perhaps they can make a difference for those who are living and visibly honor the loss in some meaningful way.
- *Some men express their grief through their creativity.* Through the ages men have created drawings and paintings, done carvings and sculptures, written symphonies, performed music, composed poetry, made things, and used about every medium imaginable to leave a record of their love, devotion, and sense of loss. Often these acts of creativity have not only helped these men heal, but they have also inspired others and encouraged their healing too.

***So this is why grief only takes one thing –
COURAGE!***

Resources

- AARP, “Men and Grief,” Grief and Loss Programs publication
Ed Ames, A Handbook for Widowers, A Centering Corporation Resource
J. E. Miller and T. R. Golden, A Man You Know Is Grieving, Willowgreen Publishing
Owen Tucker, “When My Father Died,” An unpublished story