

Grief Notes

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Am I doing this right? by Linda Hopkins, Bereavement Coordinator

How should a person grieve? We question ourselves. We question others. We may ask “Is it wrong that I have not cried?” Or we may think, “What is wrong with them that they aren’t talking about it. Shouldn’t they get help?” We live in a society with people who are apt to make judgements. A person may be viewed by some as strong for not crying. A person may be thought to be uncaring for not crying. A person may be told they need help because they are “still” sad and crying months after the death. None of these behaviors are unusual for the bereaved but they or others in their life may feel they need “fixing.”



Grief is not a disorder, a disease or a sign of weakness. It is an emotional, physical and spiritual necessity, the price you pay for love. The only cure for grief is to grieve.”

- Earl Grollman

Dr. Kenneth Doka is a grief specialist whose work is helpful in recognizing that people may have different styles of grieving. Dr. Doka uses the terms “intuitive” and “instrumental” grief to describe these styles. Intuitive grief is one full of feelings with emotions such as sadness, anger, guilt, or regret. There is often a willingness to share feelings openly with others. Instrumental grief is one of thinking and action as the bereaved adjusts to an altered life. That the instrumental griever does not show emotion to others or talk about the grief does not mean that they are not grieving. This type of grief may be one of private thoughts as they adjust to the absence of the one who has passed. It may involve doing something rather than showing feelings. Making memorials, holding events honoring the deceased, planting a tree in memory, taking care of things that need doing rather than talking about feelings are examples of instrumental grief.

There is a tendency for society to view the work of grief as emotional work and to question the process of griever who do not show or share their feelings. Those around the instrumental griever often think they need to help them open up. It is hard to resist the urge to “fix” people and suggestions are made meaning to be helpful. A support group may be urged on the bereaved. The sharing that occurs in a support group is one way of many ways that people cope with their grief. That it helps people whose style of grief benefits from talking and sharing does not mean that it would help everyone. People are often surprised to hear that the bereaved who attend support groups are in the minority. While support group information appears on these newsletters, its presence is to let you know of one type of support available and not to suggest a group is what you need.

Describing styles of grief tends to highlight the extremes when it is closer to the truth that we who grieve have elements of both styles and benefit from many different experiences that help us process our loss as we adjust to a changed life.