

Autism & Grief Project

Fact Sheet



Grieving Styles

Every person's way of coping with grief and loss will be shaped by their own strengths and experiences. Often referred to as "grieving styles," these responses may be influenced, but are not determined by, factors such as gender, ethnicity, and culture. While grief in the neurotypical population has been widely studied, the study of the experiences of grief in adults with autism is an emerging field. Interviews with autistic adults as well as anecdotal experience from professionals who work with these adults suggest that people with autism have grieving styles like those of non-autistic populations that have been studied.

Doka and Martin (2000) described the different coping responses to grief along a continuum between intuitive (emotion-focused coping strategies) and instrumental (cognitively-focused coping strategies). In their work, Doka and Martin found that those who use more intuitive coping mechanisms may find more comfort in expressing their grief through language or sharing of emotions with others. Those who may be more action-oriented in their coping, perhaps finding comfort from task-oriented projects or strategies, are using more instrumental expressions of grief.

Most individuals use a combination of approaches, but many will demonstrate a preference for either intuitive/emotion-oriented or instrumental/task-oriented coping. One important aspect of these grief styles is that there is no direct correlation with any gender or personality type. Both styles are healthy ways to express grief. However, overreliance on one versus the other can be maladaptive if the person is unable to process their grief using their preferred coping strategies. It can also be very common for people within the same family or close-knit group to have different grieving styles, which may lead to conflict.

Just as it is important not to assume a grieving style based on gender or personality in a neurotypical griever, those assumptions should also not be made about an adult with autism.

Understanding grieving styles can be helpful when providing support to individuals, particularly if they have trouble expressing their feelings. In addition, because different grieving styles within families or groups may cause tension, awareness of variations may be informative when helping resolve conflict.

Support Strategies

While each person's grief is different, here are some strategies to support grievers of differing styles:

- If a person is more inclined to an intuitive coping style, based on past experiences with loss or other difficult situations, providing opportunities for the person to communicate about the deceased may be helpful. Encouraging them to share stories, look through photo albums or videos, or participate in a support group may give them a chance to cope in a more emotion-based way.
- If a person is more inclined to an instrumental coping style, providing opportunities to focus on tasks that help memorialize the deceased may be very helpful. Helping to plan the funeral or memorial service, cleaning out closets or packing up belongings, or volunteering at a place that held special meaning to the person who died may also help the griever focus their thoughts and cope through concrete activities.
- A person who falls more along the continuum by exhibiting both grieving styles may benefit from all of the suggestions above. Allowing the grieving individual to express choice and to take ownership of how they process their grief is often the best approach to supporting someone in their grief. Regardless of grieving style, it can be helpful to remind the griever of the intimate networks around them who may be sources of support.

Case Studies – Grieving Styles

Su Li is 50 years old and her boyfriend Sam was killed in a car accident. Su Li has an extensive network of friends and colleagues; however, when they press her to talk about her feelings about the death, she prefers to avoid the subject. Her feelings are deeply intimate; she has been struggling with nightmares about the phone call from the police to notify her of the accident and her frantic drive to the hospital to see him. Sam died during surgery, before she could say goodbye. Su Li has never been one to talk about her feelings, so the additional pressure to do so now has left her feeling disconnected from her usual social network. In the past, Su Li has found that when she is distressed, she processes better when she stays mentally engaged and active, so she finds herself focusing on work to cope with Sam's death. Unfortunately, Su Li's closest friend is not familiar with the more instrumental style of grieving and is continually pressuring her to attend a grief group. Her friend is blaming Su Li's resistance to talking about Sam's death on her autism, when in fact, Su Li's inherent coping strategies are cognitively focused.

Reflection Questions

- How can Su Li's intimate network of friends better support her grief process?
- How might Su Li's unfinished business affect her grief?
- How could a social worker help Su Li communicate her needs to her friends?

Khalil is a 23-year-old whose father died last year of a heart attack. Khalil and his father were estranged after his parents were divorced. Khalil uses a symbol-supported system (such as Words for Life) to communicate. Khalil has been feeling overwhelmed by his anger at his father for leaving, guilt over having not responded to his father's recent attempts to reconcile, and resentment at both of his parents for putting him in the middle of their contentious divorce proceedings. Khalil wants to be able to share his feelings,

but as a male from a patriarchal background, every time he tries to communicate with his mother and other relatives, he is told to be strong for his mother, and that men shouldn't focus on their feelings. But without the opportunity to share, he has not been able to fully process the depth and the ambiguity of his emotional responses, both about the divorce and his father's death. Recently, one of Khalil's college professors reached out to him, noticing that he seemed distracted in class. At the professor's encouragement, he joined a college-age peer-led support group. One of the challenges for Khalil is that, although the group has welcomed him, he finds it frustrating that his symbol-supported system doesn't allow him to engage as quickly as others; by the time he can communicate his thoughts, the conversations have sometimes shifted away from what he wants to share. When he expressed this concern to the group, others admitted that they sometimes also felt they didn't have a chance to share either. Using Khalil's suggestions, the group designed a method to signal when they weren't done yet, before transitioning to the next topic.

Reflection Questions

- In what ways has Khalil's grief been enfranchised in this case?
- Have differences in communication within the support group made the group stronger for everyone?
- How might cultural affect Khalil's grief? How might a counselor provide culturally sensitive support?

Reference: Martin, T.L., and Doka, K.J. (2000). Men don't cry— women do: transcending gender stereotypes of grief. 188.