

Grieving Styles

Bereavement counselors frequently get calls from people concerned about a family member who “isn’t grieving.” They might say, “He just won’t talk about it, and he hasn’t cried yet.”

Not everyone responds to a loss by expressing emotions outwardly, talking about a death, or seeking support from others. Some people are much more likely to process their loss by thinking about it or through some sort of action. Kenneth J. Doka, Ph.D., professor of Gerontology at the College of New Rochelle and renowned specialist in the field of death, dying, and grief, has named this the instrumental style of grief.

Instrumental grievers may address loss by: being active, problem solving, struggling to find meaning, using humor, assuming a protective role, evaluating the experience, and crying privately. The activity engaged is sometimes, but not always for the sake of keeping busy. There may be a great deal of meaning behind a griever’s actions. For example, one man, after his mother’s death, went routinely to the nursing home where she lived to visit a resident with a very similar health problem. Another griever worked diligently on a sculpture created as a memorial to her loved one. And we have all heard of people who take up their loved one’s work or special cause as a way of keeping that person’s dream alive.

Many men and women are instrumental in their grieving style. Most children are instrumental grievers. They express their grief through play and other activity. When observed closely, children’s play may involve themes related to their loved one’s death. Certain aspects of this play may be regularly repeated until the child achieves understanding and mastery.

While these thought processes and activities are not always understood by family, or recognized as grief, they can be every bit as effective in coping with major loss.

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