



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 neurotypical 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:

Autism & Grief Project

Resources for Clergy & Professionals

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- 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 their thoughts 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, if available.

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