

Professionally Speaking...

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Big Boys Don't Cry

Big boys don't cry. How often have you heard those words? As long as I can remember, our society has told boys that they must be brave and strong, and that crying is something that girls do. I'm certain that this phrase echoes in the minds of grown men when they are faced with the death of their baby.

There are two kinds of mourners: Instrumental and Intuitive. At the risk of gender labeling, I have found that most men fit into the category of Instrumental Mourners. They believe that they cannot cry and are more likely to express anger. They engage in thinking and doing, and problem solving activities. Women are most often Intuitive Mourners. They express their feelings deeply and intensely, and their grief is likely to cause them great anxiety.

I will never forget the guttural wail of a father following the C-section birth of his full-term stillborn son. While his wife was still in the Operating Room, he went back to her L & D Room alone and sobbed mournfully out loud. My heart broke as I stood outside the room and witnessed the deep pain that he was feeling. However, by the time his wife was wheeled back into her room, he had totally regained his composure in order to be strong for her. He did not allow her to see the profound pain that he was feeling. I suspect that he continued to hide his feelings for the weeks and months to come, just to be strong for her.

This is typical behavior of many men, which is precisely why women think that their partners are not as sad as they are. Men may very well feel as devastated as women. They just don't show it, and this upsets the women very much. I believe that men are haunted by the belief, "Big boys don't cry." It is very typical for UNITE Support Groups to have more women than men attending regularly. Women are more likely to seek the support of others and feel comfortable sharing their emotions, even if it means crying profusely in the presence of others. Mothers very often tell me that there is tension between themselves and their partners because the men don't seem to be as heartbroken about the loss as they are.

I often tell women to talk to their partners about their feelings. Fathers will always assure their wives that they feel the pain of the loss just as deeply. However, their actions do not always speak louder than their words. They may take out their sadness and anger by engaging in a physical activity instead of crying. They may cry in the shower or on their way to work, or they may not cry at all. Crying seems to be the barometer by which sadness is measured, but it is not an accurate assessment of feelings. Men and women have been socialized to grieve differently. In general, men and women are very different creatures. Let's try to remember that when we accuse some men of not feeling. They certainly do feel – they just express themselves differently.