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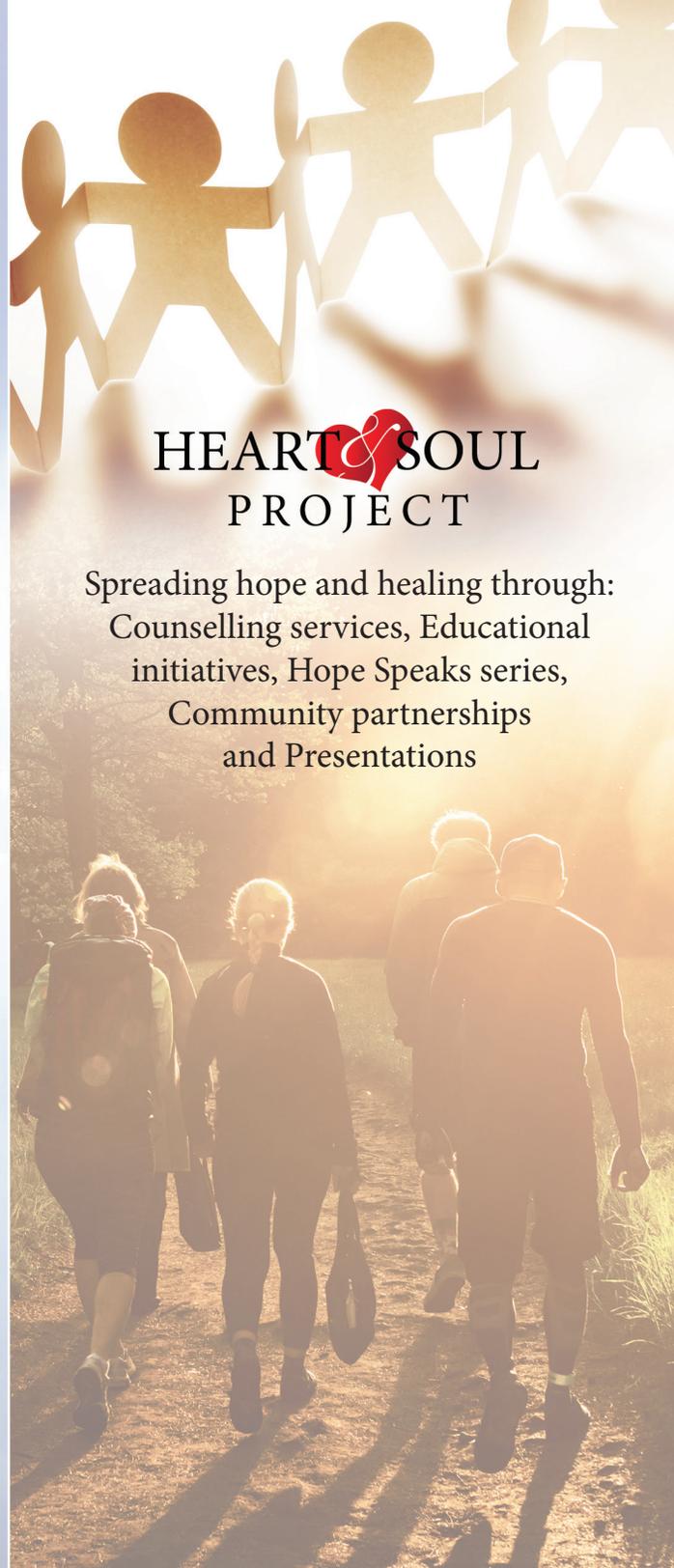


Dr. William G. (Bill) Hoy

Active in the leadership of the Association for Death Education & Counselling, Dr. Hoy holds the organization's advance practice credential, the FT (Fellow in Thanatology). Since 2013, Bill has served on the Association's board and in 2014, Bill was elected to a three-year term as the association's Treasurer.

Bill edits *GriefPerspectives*, an email newsletter read every month by more than 4,500 caregiving professionals and volunteers. His book, *Guiding People Through Grief* (Compass, 2007) is in its fourth printing and the newer volume, *Road to Emmaus* (Compass, 2008) is in its third. Along with Dr. Laura Lewis (University of Western Ontario), he co-authored the chapter "Bereavement Rituals and the Creation of Legacy" in the recently-published *Grief and Bereavement in Contemporary Society* (Routledge, 2011).

His newest book, *Do Funerals Matter? The Purposes and Practices of Death Rituals in Global Perspective* (Routledge, 2013) takes a practical anthropologist's look at the "anchors" present in funeral rituals around the world and throughout history. Additionally, he has written more than 100 journal articles and educational pamphlets for bereaved people and the professionals and volunteers who care for them.



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# Volume 8 WHEN A MAN IS GRIEVING

## HEART & SOUL PROJECT



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Any person who knows a member of the opposite gender knows that men and women are different in many ways. John Gray's 1993 classic, *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* affirmed what many people already knew: men and women sometimes seem to be from different planets. Whether gender differences in grief expression are mostly due to nature or to nurture may still be debated. But no one could seriously question the notion that, as a general rule, men and women grieve differently.

Some men were taught as boys that tears and sadness are not male traits. When hit by an errant pitch or the object of a particularly hard tackle in a football game, every generation of male athlete has been told, "Shake it off" and "Take one for the team," preferably without whining or complaining!

Whether you are a grieving man or you care about one, understanding some of the unique ways men grieve can be useful. While these are generalizations and everyone is different, these ideas may help create understanding.

Some men cry easily and that does not make them any less of men. In fact, some evidence now suggests that as men grow older, many become quite a bit more emotionally sensitive, one result of the changing hormone levels that accompany normal aging. If you are a man in your 50's and beyond, you may find you tear-up much more readily today than a decade or two ago.

Some men find small group sharing experiences to be extraordinarily meaningful, but not all do. If one is available in your community, you might want to connect with a bereavement group focused just on widowers or bereaved dads, for example.

Hormonal differences between males and females clearly account for some differences in the ways men and women grieve. Neurobiologists are learning more daily about the role hormones play in brain function, and to be sure, that effect is substantial.

Beginning at puberty, males have astronomically higher levels of Testosterone, the hormone that accounts for bulkier muscles, hair growth, the density of bones, and the tendency toward assertiveness. Some evidence suggests testosterone might also be one of the explanations for why men tend to "compartmentalize" life. The result of this ability to compartmentalize experiences explains why one bereaved dad can go to work three weeks after his son's death, put in a full day's work, and then realize on the drive home how sad he is. Throughout the day, he may not have thought about his son at all, but on the drive home, is overwhelmed by the loss.

All responses to grief occur on a continuum with few people existing on either end of a scale. For example, some people tend to be very cognitively focused and others driven mostly by their emotions—but most people live somewhere in between, with a tendency toward one or the other. In their book, *Grieving Beyond Gender*, Kenneth Doka and Terry Martin write of the instrumental pattern of coping in which grief is mostly focused on solving problems and taking action. Intuitive patterns, on the other hand, are emotionally focused and depend on affiliation with others and expressing emotional pain. People likely demonstrate a tendency toward one style or the other, but virtually all have some blending of these patterns.

One client with whom I worked was an engineer by training, priding himself in his ability to make good, rational decisions. But when his wife died suddenly, he became, in his words, "A weeping heap." Throughout his adult life, he had managed to keep his emotions "in check," but this overwhelming experience elicited tears he had not often seen.

If you are a man in grief, resist the urge to try "going it alone." You may feel that no one understands your grief, and certainly in one important way, you are right. No other person had exactly the same relationship you had with your loved one, so your experience with grief will reflect that unique relationship.

If you care for a grieving man, understand that unlike many women, men in grief are more inclined to withdraw from affiliation with others. Pushing him to join a grief group will likely backfire. Instead, many men find one confidant—a golf buddy, male hospice volunteer, fellow member of the faith community, or co-worker. Encourage this connection.

Either in place of group involvement or in addition to it, some men find writing to be an important way to express the sadness. One way to start a journal is by completing sentences like, "Today, I missed you the most when. . ." or "Right now, I'm feeling a lot of anger/guilt/sadness/loneliness about. . ." Make the journal your record of



thoughts, insights, and new discoveries in your journey through grief. Don't forget to date each entry, since in the months to come, your journal will provide a record of your progress.

One unhealthy way to cope with bereavement is to attempt to substitute other satisfactions for the relationship that has been lost. Instead of admitting the sadness and loneliness, some men turn to sex, alcohol, fast cars, and other relationships, almost as if they are trying to replace what they lost. In the long run, you take better care of yourself when you face the sadness of the loss rather than trying to substitute other people or things for the one who died.

If you or the man you care about experience persistent anger or a low mood most days, most of the day, especially if these feelings are accompanied by a lack of desire in whatever hobbies and pursuits have always brought joy and fulfillment, consultation with a mental health professional is warranted.

Deep sadness and intense anger are normal in early bereavement. But if the experience seems to deepen with time instead of lifting, and especially if the sadness or anger is accompanied by periods of not caring about life, it is possible that the normal sadness of bereavement has become clinical depression. Many effective treatments exist to help men cope with these experiences, but consultation with a mental health practitioner is warranted.

This article was written by William G. Hoy, a counselor widely known to bereaved people and the professionals who care for them. After more than 16 years working with bereaved people and directing the bereavement counseling program at Pathways Volunteer Hospice in Long Beach, CA, Dr. Hoy now teaches in the Medical Humanities Program at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.

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