Do males and females age 18-25 differ in their emotional openness when discussing the death of a loved one with a friend, family member, or stranger?

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Abstract

How do humans differ in their emotional openness with death and the grief cycle?
Males and females are taught at a young age how to express their emotions in public, in private and within certain social circles. These lessons are taught by parents, family members, other adult role models, and the media. Males are taught to keep their emotions under control and kept to themselves. While women are taught to let their emotions out and to not hold their emotions back. Stereotypically men are cold and keep their feelings to themselves while women are loose with their emotions and at times are over emotional. Many researchers have studied this social phenomenon and are in search of a clear reason behind why society continues this pattern of teachings about proper emotional outlets. When researching the emotional openness of males and females when dealing with death and bereavement, the subject gets more intense. Death is a taboo subject that no one seems to want to discuss or openly communicate about. This study was performed to examine if these stereotypical emotional gender roles also exist when dealing with communication about death. Do women talk about death more freely than men? Do men find it more difficult to talk to a stranger about death than to a family member or friend?

A tool used to determine differences in coping skills, emotional openness, and grief management is the Grief Evaluation Measure. The grief evaluation measure (GEM) was designed by John Jordan, John, Baker, Margherite Matteis, Saul Rosenthal, and Eugenia Ware. The GEM was designed to measure the general bereavement a person experiences after a loss and their willingness to express emotions regarding this loss. The GEM is a quantitative tool that does not allow the bereaved to elaborate on their feelings but, is a strict measure of bereavement feelings after loss (Jordan, 2005). The GEM asks the respondent their age, gender, education level, and other socio-economic characteristics (Jordan, 2005). The GEM then asks the respondent about previous losses and the impact each loss had on the respondent’s life and if the respondent thinks they have adjusted to this loss (Jordan, 2005).
In the third section of the survey, the GEM asks the respondent about their feelings toward the relationship with the deceased before and after their death. This section also asks the respondent about their feelings towards emotional support before and after the death and if their perception of support has changed at all due to this loss (Jordan, 2005). These questions help determine the respondents self perception, general life quality, coping self efficacy, and general feelings on interpersonal relationships as well as the impact of the death on the overall life of the respondent (Jordan, 2005). The GEM is useful to the research of finding emotional differences in males and females because this test is based on gender and age and answers specific questions the researcher has about emotional gender differences.

Another area of research in determining emotional differences in males and females can be studied by looking at the childhood each individual may have had. In childhood, a person develops feelings for loss. Whether the loss is of an inanimate object or a person, the child will learn how to cope with loss and develop the necessary emotional skills for dealing with this loss (Lunghi 2006). Regardless of age, many children experiences feelings of guilt after a loss. This is because they feel like they may have caused the death of the deceased (Samide, 2002). This is a common grief outlet in children and needs to be addressed by a parent, guardian, or positive adult role model (Samide, 2002). In the school systems teachers and administrators may help in the mourning process a child experiences with a loss. If this counseling is not done properly or effectively, the child may experience stunted emotional openness later in life (Samide, 2002). A primary factor complicating the grief of children is their level of cognitive and emotional development (Samide, 2002). If the cognitive and emotional levels of an adult are stunted, can this affect the emotional openness of males and females? In a study conducted by Chuka Ifeagwazi, depression and normal grief were compared. The conclusion was that depression and grief both stem from loss. While the normal mourner is preoccupied with the loss of a friend or
relative, the depressed person is overwhelmed by the feelings of guilt that surround the loss. The depressed person like the small child, turns the hostility of the death towards oneself and becomes introverted and closed off emotionally (Ifeagwazi, 2000).

Education about the grief process and coping skills to work through the grief are essential for children to learn. In a study that spanned ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic groups, Samide found that the children who had participated in grief counseling groups reported a significant decrease in negative feelings and grief symptoms, such as social withdrawal, depression, and anger. It is important for children to talk about and preserve the memories of the deceased and incorporate this memory into their own identities (Samide, 2002).

A child learns at a young age that openly talking about beliefs and emotions can be detrimental to their relationships with others (Lunghi, 2006). If a child is feeling threatened or that they are not gaining approval they will deny their feelings in public but, in private may accept the feelings they have without sharing these feelings with anyone else. Therefore keeping to themselves positive or negative emotions they are concerned others will not validate. This trait continues on into adulthood and may never be removed from the person’s character (Lunghi, 2006). This could be a reason for why males and females differ in their emotional openness. If as a child, a male or female was not allowed to express their ideas, their emotions, or their thoughts, this life long hindering of personal feelings could be part of the reason an individual has stunted emotions as an adult.

Loss is a common occurrence in most of our lives and the acceptance of it is part of a daily experience for most of us and should guarantee the acceptance of it but, there are reasons why a person may not accept loss and find it difficult to discuss it with anyone even themselves (Lunghi, 2006). The openness of an experience of loss can also be determined by the history of interactions with the person who has passed away or the object that has been lost (Lunghi, 2006).
The memories one has surrounding the person that has passed can also help determine the openness of emotions regarding the loss of this person. If an individual was at odds with the deceased, had a pleasant relationship with the deceased, or knew very little about the deceased, all of these are factors in the emotional openness one will express regarding this loss (Lunghi, 2006).

Another factor in emotional openness is the viewing of the body of the deceased. Many people feel that if they do not view the physical dead body of the deceased that emotionally there is no real concrete truth that they are gone (Lunghi, 2006). Without physical proof, many people will not accept or believe that their loved one has passed away and this can lead to the stunted emotional outlet one will experience when dealing with bereavement and grief (Lunghi, 2006).

The cause of death is also a factor when researching emotional openness. Many people find it difficult to discuss a death when it is sudden. Deaths are assigned five categories: homicide, suicide, natural, accident, and undetermined (Clements, 2004). Bereavement literature reports that those deaths involving interpersonal violence, trauma, suicide, and most significantly an act of “human design” are more likely to create exaggerated and potentially complicated grief responses (Clements, 2004). The deaths that are perceived as “untimely” and “unfair” are often intensified by the feelings of disbelief and shock and anger. These types of deaths are also associated with emotional closure and people are less likely to openly discuss these deaths and their emotions involving these deaths (Clements, 2004).

It is normal for grief responses to vary among people. Every person experiences loss and grief with their own perception. Although some people may be experiencing the loss of the same person, they will have varying reactions to this loss. For example, all men do not need to cry to be considered effectively grieving, yet many people believe that not crying during the grief process is unacceptable and shows a lack of emotional openness (Clements, 2004). People need
to be reminded that only they can define the loss of the loved one and that others can not tell them what is right or wrong when discussing the death, expressing emotions, and dealing with the impact of the loss (Clements, 2004). When others have experienced a similar loss this does not mean that both of these loses are the same or that any one person will have the same reaction to different losses. Most people find discussing their loss over and over again can help them emotionally conquer the feelings of bereavement and grief but, not all people allow themselves to open up emotionally about their loss (Clements, 2004). People need to become aware that they are experts on their own grief and no one can tell them how they should and shouldn’t be feeling, how soon they should be open about their feelings, or how soon they should be moving forward after their loss. Emotional expression of grief is a process and not an end point after the loss of someone loved (Clements, 2004). The grieving process takes much longer than people expect and normal grieving can take a few years (Lichtenberg, 1990). Grief should not be dealt with alone. When you are alone and are grieving and not letting your depression, anger, anxiety, frustration, and loneliness out for others to help in your healing process, you are creating stagnation in your grief (Lichtenberg, 1990). Studies have shown that it is best to be open about your emotions when trying to heal from grief and the longer you stay closed, the longer your grieving cycle will take.
Methodology

The population used to participate in the researcher’s survey will be a random sample of Western Connecticut State University male and female students between the ages of 18-25. They will be randomly selected in front of the cyber café located in the Ruth Haas Library on the midtown campus. The survey consists of 10 questions with multiple answers for each question. Each question asks the respondent to rate their likelihood to emotional openness when discussing the loss of a loved one with a friend, a family member, or a stranger. 100 male and female students will be surveyed. Participants will be asked to fill out an informed consent form. This form will include information on the experiment and the procedure of the survey. Should a participant feel that their mental health has been affected by this survey the consent form will
also supply the contact information for the counseling center located in the student center on the downtown campus of Western Connecticut State University. The participants will also be told that they may stop the survey at any given time if they feel it necessary to do so. The names of all participants will be kept confidential and the consent forms will be removed from the completed surveys prior to examination of the information supplied by the participants. No names will be included in the research findings and consent forms with participants names will be kept separate from the completed surveys.

Data Gathering Instrument

Amanda Parks
Senior Thesis Survey

To obtain information on emotional openness in males and females age 18-25 when discussing the death of a friend or family member with a stranger, friend, or family member.

Questionnaire:

Are you male or female? Please circle one: Male   Female

Your Age: _____

Do you know anyone who has passed away?
Yes   or   No

If yes, please think of one person and answer the following questions.

Was this person a friend or family member? Please circle one: Friend   Family member

How long ago did this person pass away? Please circle one
Less than 1 year   1-2 years ago   2-3 years ago   4 or more years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Please answer the following questions on a scale of 1-5</th>
<th>Stranger</th>
<th>Friend</th>
<th>Family Member</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1=very likely, 2= likely, 3=don't know, 4=not likely, 5=not at all likely</td>
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Do you openly talk about this person’s death to a:

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<tr>
<th>Stranger</th>
<th>Friend</th>
<th>Family Member</th>
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</thead>
</table>

Do you find yourself avoiding talking about this person to a:

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<tr>
<th>Stranger</th>
<th>Friend</th>
<th>Family Member</th>
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Do you openly talk about things that happened in this person’s life to a:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Stranger</th>
<th>Friend</th>
<th>Family Member</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
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<td>Do you feel like you can open up about your feelings about the death of this person to a:</td>
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<td>Do you wish that you didn’t have to open up about this persons’ death to a:</td>
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<td>Do you find it difficult to openly talk about this person’s life to a:</td>
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<td>Do you find it difficult to openly talk about this person’s death to a:</td>
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